The New Criterion

September 1990

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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The New Criterion *September 1990*

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Notes & Comments: September 1990

In praise of Survey

Survey: A Journal of East & West Studies, which was founded in Britain by the Congress for Cultural Freedom in the 1950s, is suspending publication. This is unhappy news for those readers the world over—largely scholars, intellectuals, and specialists in Soviet and Eastern European affairs, and never great in number—who had learned over the years to rely upon its expert analyses of developments in the Communist world and its equally important documentation of Western responses to those developments. In that sometimes bizarre intellectual territory that came to be known as Sovietology, *Survey* could always be counted on to illuminate the difficult truths that so many others—not excluding some of the most renowned authors in the field—either knowingly concealed or lacked the wit to discern.

The unpleasant truth is, at the height of the Cold War—no less than in the worst years of the Great Terror in the 1930s—there was much lying in the West about Stalin and the nature of the Soviet regime. Writers who earned illustrious international reputations as authorities on Soviet history and politics—among them, E. H. Carr in his multivolume *History of Soviet Russia*, Isaac Deutscher in his biographies of Stalin and Trotsky, and Alexander Werth both in his regular dispatches to *The New Statesman* in London and *The Nation* in New York and in his many books about the USSR—systematically misrepresented the facts and served as eager apologists for the Soviet tyranny; and they have not lacked successors of similar disposition and eminence down to our own day.

It was precisely to combat such widespread political mystification that *Survey* was founded in the Fifties, and no publication in the world has carried out this mission with a more exemplary record of scholarly probity and moral clarity. Both its founding editor, Walter Z. Laqueur, and the editor who has guided *Survey*'s course in more recent years, Leopold Labedz, are distinguished scholars and gifted writers who have themselves made important contributions to our knowledge of Communist and Soviet affairs—and much else. Learned in several fields and commanding many languages, and knowing something from personal experience about the realities of totalitarianism in our time, they brilliantly succeeded in marshaling a good many other specialist writers in the campaign to establish the truth about a subject that was so often fictionalized in the press, in the academy, and in the foreign offices of a good many Western nations.

They were not always thanked for this effort, either—for it was one of the peculiarities of the Cold War that the West, which represented the side of truth, freedom, and justice, was from first to last under

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unremitting attack from a significant number of its own writers, artists, editors, journalists, academics, scientists, et al., who continued year after year, decade after decade, to support the Communist cause and to identify the Western democracies as the hated enemies of "progressive" mankind. Indeed, fashionable opinion in the West was mainly of this *gauchiste* persuasion; and where neither illusions about nor connivance with Soviet power shaped opinion, a certain element of moral cowardice in the face of that power certainly did.

The history of this Western surrender to Soviet myth—and to the notion that Communism, whatever its evils and failures, somehow remained an ideal to which "progressives" should remain loyal—was also an integral part of the intellectual agenda that *Survey* set for itself. Certain numbers of the magazine that were mainly devoted to this subject—Number 41 (April 1962), on "The Western Image of the Soviet Union 1917-1962," with its studies of, among much else, the Webbs' *Soviet Communism: A New Civilization*, the Left Book Club, and press accounts of the Moscow Trials; and Number 128/129 (March 1988), a special issue, edited by Melvin J. Lasky, that collected Mr. Labedz's principal essays under the title of "The Use & Abuse of Sovietology," are classics of contemporary historical literature.

With the end of the Cold War, in which the West's resistance to Communism has proved to be triumphant and its harsh moral judgment of Soviet totalitarianism completely vindicated, a vast quantity of new historical research and intellectual analysis is certain to be produced on both sides of the now dismantled Iron Curtain. When these new histories of the Cold War come to be written—and those written in the East, we predict, will be even tougher in their judgment of our Western "progressives" than we have been—*Survey* is assured of an honored place, both as source of important information and as a model of scholarship in the service of moral intelligence.

A sign of the Times

In cultural life, as elsewhere in human affairs, there are events that command our attention not because of their intrinsic value but because they are symptoms of broader artistic or intellectual developments. This is so even at moments—as now—when the dominant cultural voices are those of the enemies of culture, and when, consequently, the symptoms in question tend to herald confusion, trivialization, and decay rather than revival or revitalization. Readers of *The New York Times* were treated to a depressing case in point on Sunday, July 22, when the Arts and Leisure section of that paper carried a long, front-page article by Michael Brenson titled "Is 'Quality' an Idea Whose Time Has Gone?"

Those familiar with what now passes for criticism in the so-called culture pages of our newspaper of record would perhaps have had a quick and impolite reply to this question, at least in so far as it applies to the *Times*. And those familiar with Mr. Brenson's sporadic expostulations in the pages of that paper would certainly have expected nothing other than what they got: a low-wattage jumble of fashionable opinions laced here and there with pretentious "intellectual" irrelevancies. "Aesthetic emotion," Mr. Brenson intones, "has often resulted when the form of a painting or sculpture was particularly magisterial or inventive." Is this the level at which *The New York Times* wishes to address its readers?

Yet the appearance of Mr. Brenson's article is worthy of notice because it serves as a grim indicator of just how much the enemies of culture have won. The question he attempts to discuss is whether quality is the appropriate touchstone for criticism. Mr. Brenson informs us, correctly, that there "may be no more divisive word [than quality] in the art world just now." The chief rival of quality, as Mr. Brenson also perceives, is politics. Thus he tells us that in the 1960s "some black

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artists began to consider [quality] a racist word" and that now, for many involved in the world of culture—museum curators and critics as well as artists—"there is hardly an ounce of sympathy for the word."

That lack of sympathy for the idea of quality and its new status as a symbol of "cultural repression" might be cause for alarm does not seem to occur to Mr. Brenson. But for anyone concerned with the fate of our culture, the attack on the notion of quality is a disaster. The issue, after all, is whether our intellectual and artistic life is to be determined by the imperatives of quality. Or should it be determined instead by the imperatives of politics—the imperatives, that is to say, of racialism, feminism, multiculturalism, and "alternative" life styles?

Mr. Brenson does not forthrightly denounce the idea of quality. In the best *Times* fashion, he denounces it circuitously. ("Should the word quality be used? Probably not. . . . Should judgments be made . . . even if the word is not used? Of course.") Indeed, his latest effort may be said to succeed splendidly in at least one respect: it is a consummate example of the *Times*'s policy of criticism by equivocation. It adopts the pose of spurious evenhandedness perfected in the news-reporting sections of the paper and applies them to cultural issues. The basic trick has three steps: first, you describe a centrist position as an extreme right-wing position; then you assure readers that both sides have something to say for themselves; finally, you occupy a place midway between the newly defined center and something considerably to the left. In this, Mr. Brenson has shown himself to be something of a virtuoso: "there are abuses on both sides," he tells us; the Right supports quality, the Left criticizes it, both have a point. . . As if the decision to dispense with the idea of quality, and to subordinate cultural life to direct political demands, can be properly made by splitting the difference!

"Just because some artists do not value the word quality," Mr. Brenson assures us, "does not mean they have no standards or interest in aesthetics." Quite right. But without a commitment to the idea of quality, their standards will be *political* standards, their interest in aesthetics will be in its use as a tool to achieve political goals. Without the criterion of quality, however difficult it may be to define or apply, we face the insinuation of political tests into every sphere of cultural life, from our galleries and museums to our classrooms and publishing houses. It is as a sign of the times—of how far this process has already gone—that Mr. Brenson's shallow musings are such bad news.

Red Seal survives

The most interesting recent development in the hitherto torpid world of American classical recording has been the flood of reissues from the fabled RCA Victor Red Seal backlist. RCA Victor, known as just plain Victor when it was started ninety years ago in Camden, New Jersey, was a pioneer in classical-music recording on 78 RPM shellac discs. Its first star was tenor Enrico Caruso, who made his first recordings for the old Victor company in 1904. In a sense, Caruso made Victor, but he was by no means the only great artist to grace its catalogue.

Victor recorded most if not all of the figures of the golden age of singing before 1925. When the future electronics giant RCA took over Victor in the late 1920s, the parent company continued to record the greatest artists—singers, conductors, and instrumentalists alike—on the American scene. Thus it is to the RCA Victor Red Seal list that we owe the great recordings of pianists Sergei Rachmaninov and Vladimir Horowitz, violinist Jascha Heifetz, conductors Leopold Stokowski, Serge Koussevitsky, Arturo Toscanini, and Pierre Monteux, and the Boston and Philadelphia orchestras in their greatest days. And along with these immortal figrues, Victor recorded a plethora of other great artists not quite so famous but equally distinguished.

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When the LP record came along around 1950, RCA Victor quickly made many of the treasures from its backlist available in the new format. These records were eagerly seized upon by music lovers, but as the years passed, however, the corporation clearly lost interest in its indispensable task of rendering homage to an era of remarkable musical performances. Such transfers as RCA did make were mostly of poor technical quality and limited public availability.

Now this sorry state of affairs has been changed by the sale of the RCA Victor backlist and name to the Bertelsmann Music Group, a giant German recording combine. Whatever the implications for new original recordings of this sale of an American recording company to foreign interests might be —in this context must also be mentioned the sale of CBS Records to Sony, the Japanese mega-giant—the effect of the new ownership on the availability of the RCA Victor backlist has been massive and benficial, and for this music lovers can only be grateful.

Of particular interest among the RCA/Bertelsmann rereleases are newly availabile Toscanini performances, all in excellent sound. Here, on CDs, are not only the familiar Toscanini standbys of Beethoven and Brahms symphonies, but also of the Beethoven Concerto with Heifetz and the Beethoven Third Piano Concerto with Arthur Rubinstein. Even more interesting is a smashing filmed version—in excellent sound and picture quality, and available both on LaserDisc and VHS videocassette—of Toscanini's mythic 1949 broadcast (and telecast!) of Verdi's *Aida*. Here at last is visual, not just as hitherto aural, evidence as to Toscanini's supreme greatness as a conductor.

One should not think that the RCA/Bertelsmann rereleases are restricted to Toscanini, important as his performances undoubtedly are. Now too we have available (among many others CDs), marvelous versions of the American recordings of the now little-discussed tenor Tito Schipa, the extraordinary Rubinstein-Heifetz-Piatigorsky performances of the Mendelssohn and Tchaikowsky piano trios, and the important 1947 Rubinstein performance of the Karol Szymanowki Symphonie Concertante (1932), also known as the Piano Concerto no. 4.

One nagging question remains. Why has the German Bertelsmann firm chosen to do so brilliantly what the American RCA so clearly scorned? Can it be that Bertelsmann has found a way to make money out of these musical treasures, a way known in the past to RCA but forgotten recently? It seems hard to believe that Germans would have any special answers, answers now denied to Americans, about how to make money. Instead, a quite different kind of answer must be suggested to this question: it is highly likely that the Bertelsmann Music Group, for all its natural corporate desire to turn a profit, might be motivated by a recognition of the cultural value of just what is contained in the RCA backlist. There can be little doubt that such recognition was not present in the RCA boardroom: if this supposition indeed be true, it would go far to suggest that RCA, like so many other private and public institutions in American life today, was quite content to participate in the trashing of American and world civilization, a trashing that we see taking place all around us. At least we should be thankful that we have now been saved, in the area of these wonderful old perfomances, by these welcome foreigners from across the ocean.

The Yale Review
sentenced to death

With the announcement in June by President Benno C. Schmidt of Yale University that he had decided to order the death of *The Yale Review*, one of the last of the nation's general-interest intellectual quarterlies is gone. That in itself would be an unwelcome development. But almost as disturbing as the loss of the journal itself, which had

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once been a publication of considerable distinction, were the reasons offered by President Schmidt to justify his decision —reasons that, at best, suggest that the President of Yale does not himself have a very clear understanding of what sort of journal *The Yale Review* had been in its prime or of what its real intellectual function might continue to be today in the hands of an editor capable of restoring it to its proper place in American intellectual life.

Most astounding of all was President Schmidt's absurd claim that in order to keep *The Yale Review* going, the university would have to raise "more than one million dollars ... to endow the annual costs of the *Review*." If this is the kind of fiscal intelligence that is governing the operations of the President's office at Yale, the university is in as much trouble as its condemned *Review*.

In the open letter that President Schmidt addressed to the Yale community on this matter, the following points were made: the *Review* was said by a faculty review committee to have failed to serve "as a vehicle for the writing of the Yale faculty"; that it was "increasingly unlikely to find a wide audience"; that "increasing specialization among the reading public [has] tended to defeat efforts to improve the imbalance of income and expense" at the *Review*; and that for the *Review* to continue to be published, it would be obliged—as the faculty review committee recommended—to "present to a considerably greater degree the thought and research of the Yale community."

Now what is remarkable about all this is that *The Yale Review*, while it has always published a great many distinguished Yale authors, was never intended to be, strictly speaking, "a vehicle for the writing of the Yale faculty," and it is not our impression, in any case, that the "Yale community" is conspicuously lacking in opportunities to present its "thought and research." That the faculty review committee could find no larger purpose in publishing the *Review* is itself a shocking example—shocking in its sheer self-interest—of the kind of "increasing specialization" that was complained of. Never mind that reference to "a wide audience"; the *Review* never had one, never needed one, and doesn't need one now. The unspoken assumption behind both the committee's recommendations and President Schmidt's letter is that Yale itself no longer produces the kind of educated person who is capable of reading a well-edited, well-written general-interest journal dealing with a broad range of subjects—politics, history, science, literature, art, music, etc. If that is the case, then the death of the *Review* signifies the loss of a good deal more than a quarterly review.

In its best days, which pretty much came to a close with the departure of John J. E. Palmer, who edited *The Yale Review* from 1954 to 1979, the magazine did indeed embrace such a broad range of subjects. There was a regular column devoted to "Science in Review," and another to "New Records in Review"—the latter written by B. H. Haggin. Articles on Franklin Roosevelt and the U.S. Congress might be followed by others on "Baudelaire and Music" or Benjamin Britten. Literature received a good deal of serious critical attention—for a time Randall Jarrell was the *Review*'s regular poetry critic—and so did history. It added something to the quality of our civilization to have such a journal, and it would do so to have such a journal again.

Admittedly, the *Review* had lost some of its intellectual luster in recent years—but that, perhaps, was also a reflection of the changes that had taken place at Yale. It is sad—and dreadfully significant—that President Schmidt can devise no better way of dealing with this matter than to kill the *Review*. For the problem that *The Yale Review* symbolizes—both for Yale and for the rest of us—is not so easily disposed of.

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The prospect before us

by Hilton Kramer

We are aware that a civilization has the same fragility as a life. The circumstances that could send the works of Keats and Baudelaire to join the works of Menander are no longer inconceivable; they are in the newspapers.
—Paul Valéry

As this first year in the last decade of the twentieth century draws to a close, there can be no question but that our culture is in deep and terrible trouble. The engines of publicity—in the arts no less than in politics, if one may still make such a distinction—continue to produce their preposterous claims, and there is no shortage of people eager, if not indeed desperate, to embrace them even in the absence of any real conviction about their truth. But these empty rituals of celebration can no longer disguise the profound and enduring malaise that now pervades virtually every sphere of cultural life. The feeling that the arts have been captured by the enemies of art is more widespread than ever before. So is the sense that the standards that once guided us in matters of artistic accomplishment, intellectual analysis, and moral inquiry have now been supplanted by attitudes and ideologies that, in regard to both art and life, are transparently corrupt and corrupting. In the atmosphere of cynicism and opportunism that encloses so many aspects of our culture today, the very idea of stringent judgment and rigorous distinction, without which the life of art and the life of the mind are nothing but a sham, is openly and proudly disavowed. When the concept of quality in art was recently stigmatized in a lengthy article in *The New York Times* as little more than an instrument of racism and repression, the pronouncement of this pernicious doctrine merely confirmed in principle what the new barbarians had already established as a standard practice: the imposition of politics —above all, the politics of race, gender, and multiculturalism—as the only acceptable criterion of value in every realm of culture and life.

This barbarian element—so hostile to the fundamental tenets of our civilization, and so heedless of the wreckage it leaves in its wake—can no longer be regarded as constituting a marginal component of contemporary cultural life. Far from representing a radical fringe, which was once the case, it now commands an immense following in our mainstream institutions. It has already radically transformed the teaching of the arts and the humanities in our colleges and universities, and this has had the effect—among much else—of alienating some of the best intellectual talent from these fields of study. Many gifted teachers have left academic life because of the ideological tests that have come to dominate these fields; and many gifted students who might, in other cultural circumstances, have happily entered these fields, are now permanently lost to them. The extent to which academic life, especially in the arts and the humanities, has become the arena of a fierce ideological

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orthodoxy—all in the name of "liberal" values, of course—is now an open scandal. Yet the situation gets worse even as it is more and more talked about. Its real cost will not be fully calculated until, a generation or more hence, the time will come when we shall be obliged to recognize how few first-rate minds chose to to seek their intellectual fortunes in the academy.

Outside the universities, the situation is not much better. It was inevitable, perhaps, that as money and politics emerged as the dominant issues in the arts—as they overwhelmingly did in the 1980s—the whole level of discussion of artistic matters, not only in the press but in the institutions concerned with the arts, would be lowered and coarsened, if not irreversibly corrupted. Yet even expecting the worst, there was still something shocking about the hysteria and irresponsible hyperbole, often descending to outright demogoguery, that characterized the response of our arts institutions this summer to the debate in Congress over the re-authorization legislation for the National Endowment for the Arts. And here we are not talking primarily about the so-called "alternative space" groups. These are themselves the creation and the permanent wards of the government patronage system, and could naturally be expected to fight for their right to remain licensed rebels at the taxpayers' expense. Licensed rebels: that is what they were created to be in the heyday of our national prosperity—a sort of negative cultural luxury that a thriving economy could easily afford—and it should have come as no surprise that its beneficiaries truly believed their annual government grant had become as much of an entitlement as the check from the Unemployment Office. That was what the policy of our government arts agencies had given them to believe.

What was really shocking was the response of our major museums and other mainstream organizations—those that are supposed to represent what is finest and most enduring in our civilization—that went into action like any other special-interest political group, clearly prepared to conduct a cut-throat lobbying campaign at the behest of all those professional arts lobbies that now loom so large on the national cultural scene. (Make no mistake about it: the business of getting hold of the government's money for the arts is now itself big business.) The scene was the same the country over. All those frenzied petition-signing stations set up in the lobbies of our art museums, their tables draped with black crepe as a sign of mourning for the death of our civilization; all those leaflets, with their simple-minded slogans and misleading "facts"; the whole atmosphere of drummed-up fear and paranoia designed to suggest that our culture, if not the country itself, was on the verge of something like a fascist coup—all of this was not only damaging to the institutional probity of the museums and to their reputation (or what was left of it) for disinterested judgment, but is certain to bring them in the future the kind of unfriendly public scrutiny they will have every reason to regret. The truth is, our museums have become spendthrift institutions, lavishing immense sums of money on expanded facilities, expanded programs, and expensive acquisitions guaranteed to cause even greater fiscal problems in the future. They have also shown themselves to be unreliable guardians of their own collections, selling off treasured art works for easy cash and short-term goals. By entering the political arena as they have now done, museums have hastened the day when a public reckoning of their affairs will be insisted upon. This is not a happy development.

What was most appalling about this summer's display of political hysteria in the museums, however, was the sheer hypocrisy that surrounded it. Every museum curator in the country knows very well that our artists today enjoy a greater degree of freedom of expression than has probably been true of artists at any time, anywhere, in the past. Yet the entire curatorial profession agreed to participate in this well-organized charade that had as its premise the notion that we are living under some sort of McCarthyite terror in the arts. The names of Hitler and Stalin were

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bandied about by people—not only in the museums but in the media as well—who plainly hadn't the foggiest understanding of the realities of life under a totalitarian regime. It was an unlovely spectacle—ignorance and self-interest combining to obscure the truth.

If there was indeed any reason to fear the imposition of a McCarthyite prohibition on freedom of speech in this situation, the real threat was coming from the liberals themselves, who were so quick and so unashamed in denouncing anyone who disagreed with them—about the Mapplethorpe case, for example—as an enemy of democracy and freedom, perhaps even a fascist (the polite name for which in the media just now is "right-wing fundamentalist"). In all of this there was the added hypocrisy of pretending—which the museums and their allies in the arts lobbying organizations routinely did—that the entire debate about the National Endowment for the Arts came down to a simple choice between a total, unquestioned endorsement of the Mapplethorpe pictures and a total, unquestioned acceptance of the views of Senator Helms. That there was to be no place in this discussion for the concerns of ordinary citizens about the declining standards of public decency in our society was, incredibly, the position—the public position, anyway—of virtually every representative of a major cultural institution who spoke out on this issue. Privately, to be sure, one often heard otherwise. After I published a long article on this subject in *The New York Times* in July 1989—well before Senator Helms introduced his notorious amendment on the Senate floor—more than one museum director confided to me privately that he completely agreed with the position I had taken, which was that the public did indeed have a legitimate concern about the way the allocation of tax dollars might affect standards of public decency and amenity. The *Times* received an avalanche of letters in response to that article, but none of the museum directors who had spoken to me was heard from. One told me frankly that if he spoke up publicly on this issue, his entire staff might resign in protest, and his own job might be in jeopardy. It went without saying that a job in another museum would be out of the question. He would be tainted. This is the real McCarthyism of our time—liberal McCarthyism.

Where the new barbarism manifests itself most insidiously, of course, is in its adamant insistence that it is now the primary function of the arts—and of arts institutions—to serve the cause of redressing every social, political, sexual, ethnic, and even regional grievance that one or another "minority," or self-proclaimed victim group, may wish to bring as an indictment against our society. To this deadly doctrine the universities have totally surrendered, and they are not alone. The foundations faithfully abide by it, the museums are rapidly capitulating to it, our theater long ago placed itself completely at its service, and the media more and more endorse and advance its every claim. What is most glaringly obvious is the leveling effect of this political program, for the implementation of which quotas based on race, gender, etc., are mandatory and aesthetic distinctions must be abandoned, if not indeed declared to be obsolete—this, after all, was the point of that article in *The New York Times* condemning the idea of quality in art. In other words, distinctions of quality must be jettisoned in the interest of affirmative action.

What may not, at first glance, be quite so apparent are the destructive consequences that this program guarantees for the minorities it is ostensibly intended to benefit. We shall soon find ourselves, as the influence of this political gospel makes itself felt, in a situation in which no artists belonging to a minority group will ever be able to believe that their work has been singled out on the basis of merit. This is a terrible fate for an artist: never to know if one's work has been acclaimed on the grounds of its achievement or, as it is now more likely to be the case, simply because its producer belongs to the requisite racial, sexual, ethnic, etc., category. What this program will amount to in practice is the creation of a special class of "artists,"

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who will be seen—by themselves as well as others—as the art world's counterpart to welfare clients, an artist-underclass entirely lacking in artistic legitimacy or credibility and sustained solely by bureaucratic fiat and a government dole. It is a grim prospect—and grim, most of all, for artists of talent and accomplishment who belong to the minorities in question.

For this development, terrible as it undoubtedly is, is not going to destroy the life of art in our society. But it is going to drive more and more art of real quality and distinction out of the public arena, and make it once again—as it was in the age of the avant-garde in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—a more or less coterie experience, its access limited to the few who know and care. This, if it should happen, will be a real loss for our democratic culture—but it is a denouement that is being forced upon us by the fanatic partisans of a political movement that insists that all distinctions of quality in art be abandoned in the name of democracy.

From the archives of the academy:

"I would like to begin with the proposition that female orgasm is unnecessary. I am not, of course, saying that it is unnecessary to any particular woman that she experience orgasm or, for that matter, to any particular man that his female partner do so; rather, I mean that women's orgasm and, by extension, women's pleasure can be extraneous to that culmination of heterosexual desire which is copulation. Women's pleasure can take place outside, or independent of, the male sexual economy whose pulsations determine the dominant culture, its repressions, its taboos, and its narratives, as well as the 'human sciences' developed to explain them. Considering the last decade's preoccupations with sexual difference and the pleasure of the text, it is surprising that theories concerned with the relation between narrative and pleasure have largely neglected to raise the issue of the difference between women's and men's reading pleasures. But this question seems to require critical tools that, for reasons I explore in this essay, have not been available. Indeed, the same analytic paradigms that give us professional access to texts have already determined the terms in which we accede to, comply with, or resist the coercions of a cultural program for pleasure that is not interested in—and whose interests may be threatened by—the difference of women's pleasure. . . . But, first, let us return to the question of orgasm. We all know what male orgasm looks like. . . ."

From "Coming Unstrung: Women, Men, Narrative, and Principles of Pleasure," by Susan Winnett; *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* May 1990, Volume 105, Number 3.

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Memoria in aeternum: Hans Hofmann at the Whitney

by Karen Wilkin

I've heard Hans Hofmann spoken of with awe for almost as long as I can remember. A teacher at my high school had studied with him, a fact often repeated to account for her unorthodox methods—even in New York, in those days. It conferred status, although she ranked lower than a colleague who had actually been a student at the Bauhaus, but that's another matter. Today, almost twenty-five years after Hofmann's death, such connections still seem to count. A well-known and successful New York landscape painter, who has been exhibiting for more than two decades, is often described as having been "Hofmann's monitor," as though that established his legitimacy. A few years ago, when I gave a lecture on American art of the 1940s at a museum near Toronto, I was introduced to a shy, soft-spoken man of about sixty who wanted to tell me about his time as a Hofmann student. He had gone to New York at the urging (and with the assistance) of a remarkable woman named Alexandra Luke, one of English-speaking Canada's first abstract painters, herself a veteran of eight summers at Hofmann's Provincetown school. I had heard of Luke's devotion to Hofmann, but I hadn't known that she had sent younger Canadian artists to see him. Her former protégé asked if I knew a certain New York landscape painter; "He was Hofmann's monitor, you know."

The memories remain vivid and the legend persists. This spring, a serious and gifted painter, a man about the same age as the ex-monitor, responded to a wonderful picture of a vase of irises on a hotel dresser in the "Matisse in Morocco" exhibition by saying, "That's what we were all doing in Hofmann's class—painting big furniture." There's a famous story about how the young Helen Frankenthaler (who spent all of three weeks at the Provincetown school) refused to let Hofmann draw on her rendering of a nude, but insisted that he demonstrate his corrections next to her image, and there's an equally famous sheet with the two nudes side by side to prove it. (Young women painters often draw considerable courage from this.) And then there was an earnest young student at a West Coast university who asked me if it was true that "Clement Greenberg got it all from Hofmann." And so on.

The stories are almost all about Hofmann as teacher and, as has often been pointed out, it is as a teacher that his reputation lives on most vividly. Despite the radical inventiveness and originality of his paintings, and despite the many first-rate paintings among them, Hofmann is seldom discussed in terms of his art. More often we hear about his powerful influence on a generation on New York artists as bringer of the message of advanced French painting. We hear about his theory of implying space while asserting the importance of the flat canvas—the famous "push-pull" dictum that translated volumes and voids into two-dimensional color planes. His contribution is variously said to lie in his having amalgamated Cubist structure and

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Fauvist color, in having insisted on how good Matisse was at a time when Picasso dominated the imagination of most adventurous young American artists, but he is said to have done all this through his teaching, not by the example of his art.

Of course, it was as a teacher that Hofmann first came to America, in 1930. He had been invited to lead a summer course at Berkeley by Worth Ryder, the chairman of the art department and an alumnus of the school Hofmann ran in Munich from 1915 to 1929. After World War I the Hans Hofmann Schule für Bildende Kunst attracted many foreign students: a group of Americans who included, along with Ryder, Louise Nevelson and Carl Holty, and Europeans who later moved to the U.S., such as the abstract painter Ludwig Sander and the influential teacher Vaclav Vytlacil. When Hofmann began teaching in New York, first at the Art Students League and then, in the fall of 1933, at his own school, his reputation preceded him. As a teacher, he had the authority of his firsthand experience of the European avant-garde. During his early years in Paris, before 1914, Hofmann had gotten to know just about all the legendary figures that serious young New York painters dreamed about in the Thirties and Forties. He knew Picasso, Braque, and Léger; he had studied alongside Matisse at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière; he was particularly close to Robert Delaunay. For aspiring American artists, especially for those who had traveled little, constrained by the Depression and by World War II and its aftermath, contact with Hofmann was a surrogate for direct contact with the European sources of modernism. The role had special resonance, during most of the years that he ran his schools in New York and Provincetown—until 1958—since it was only in the late Forties that American painters and sculptors began to believe that serious, important art could be made in the U.S., by Americans, rather than being the sole province of Europeans. Hofmann's presence made the ideas of the Paris vanguard immediate and living, instead of remote.

But if Hofmann the teacher was revered, Hofmann the painter seems to have inspired less awe. His pupils and fellow artists appear to have taken his art seriously, but to have awarded it less than wholehearted approval. As Clement Greenberg, a friend of Hofmann's as well as his perceptive critic, said recently, "His painting was respected but not admired." Often Hofmann's paintings were dismissed as demonstrations of theory, something that would be highly valued in fashionable circles nowadays but that serious New York artists of the 1940s saw as problematic. The wide-rangingness of Hofmann's art—its lack of signature image or method—was even cited as evidence that it was about problem solving and not about deeply felt emotion.

Hofmann had his champions, of course —Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, Thomas Hess, and a few others. The prestigious Kootz Gallery was his loyal supporter and showed his work annually. Hofmann was included in a number of key exhibitions of radical art, and in 1948 the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Massachusetts, organized a Hofmann retrospective, the first major museum show of any one artist associated with Abstract Expressionism. The Whitney accorded him a retrospective of sorts in 1957, but other museums treated him as somewhat marginal; when, in 1958, the Museum of Modern Art organized the influential exhibition "New American Painting" for circulation in Europe, Hofmann's work was not included.

Toward the end of his long life and after his death—at the beginning of 1966, a month short of his eighty-sixth birthday —attention increased, but he has continued to be regarded as a difficult, oddball artist, undeniably important, but not easy to like. He is, by and large, a painter's painter, not one who appeals to a large public. Seeing enough Hofmanns to form an educated opinion has required persistence and good long-term memory—or access to private collections, since public exhibitions of his work have been far from comprehensive, or widely spaced, or both. MOMA organized a large

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exhibition in 1963, and the Metropolitan's "New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970" included a good selection of Hofmanns. The Hirshhorn Museum sponsored a retrospective, again of sorts, in 1976, but this show, while fascinating and full of wonderful paintings, was the highly individual choice of the painter and critic Walter Darby Bannard and not a complete overview; moreover, it was seen only in Washington, D.C., and Houston. The Metropolitan has occasionally hung the complete *Renate* series, nine large pictures painted in 1964, many of them a bit over-cooked, or, more accurately, over-sauced, but still a reasonable cross-section of Hofmann's last works. Otherwise, the best source of information about Hofmann the artist, rather than the teacher, has the been annual small exhibition at André Emmerich Gallery, each tightly focused on a specific aspect of a long and notably varied career. All of which means that the current exhibition at the Whitney, the first complete full-career retrospective, is long overdue, extremely welcome, and an occasion for celebration.[1]

Luckily for us, and for Hofmann, the show is informative, well-balanced, and well-chosen. We are spared the Whitney's usual in-house practice of exhibiting every surviving specimen (however lackluster or irrelevant) from infancy on, leaving the viewer exhausted by the time mature work heaves into view—and it must be said that it hasn't always been the *best* mature work on view at Whitney retrospectives. Much of Hofmann's early work, from his Paris and Munich periods, has been lost or destroyed, and there was a long period when his obligations as a teacher left him little time to paint, all of which helps to account for the economy of the show's introductory section, but credit is also due the guest curator, Cynthia Goodman. A small selection of student drawings, early watercolors, and a few very early portraits help to give a sense of Hofmann's origins and his evolution—something missing from Darby Bannard's show, which had other aims—but the exhibition's main emphasis is, not unexpectedly, on the last decade of Hofmann's life, when, liberated from teaching for the first time since 1915, he produced many of his most important and best paintings. It would be possible to quibble with individual selections and omissions, but the cumulative effect is of a large group of good Hofmanns, an ample supply of very good ones, and a handful of masterpieces. All in all, a pleasure.

The odd shape of Hofmann's career is made apparent by this show, but only if one pays attention to the dates on the labels. Even though there might be thirty years (and not many pictures) between a free-wheeling Provincetown landscape and an energetic composition of overscaled brushmarks, the continuity of spirit and of habits of construction make the gap seem irrelevant. Those exuberant, superheated mature paintings are, in some ways, the work of a young artist in full command of his powers who happened to be an old man. Hofmann was a late bloomer, even by the standards of a generation of postwar abstract artists who often didn't hit their stride before forty. He was close to seventy before he began to produce ambitious, successful paintings consistently and in any quantity, and nearly eighty when he closed his school and, in a dazzling burst of energy, painted most of the vigorous large-scale canvases that insured his reputation. These late works, dramas enacted by slabs and slashes and washes of saturated, all-stops-out color, are often so powerful that they sometimes make Hofmann's earlier pictures, good as many of them are, appear more interesting as precursors than for their own merits. The hatching and the bold planes of a drawing of a nude from the 1930s, for example, seem to an-

1 "Hans Hofmann" is on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art through September 16. It will travel to the Center for the Fine Arts, Miami (November 22, 1990-January 20, 1991), and to the Chrysler Museum, Norfolk (February 14-April 14, 1991). A catalogue by Cynthia Goodman, with essays by Irving Sandler and Clement Greenberg, has been published by the Whitney Museum/Prestel-Verlag (200 pages, $50; $32.50 paper).

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ticipate the way Hofmann would later dispose blocks of color across and "in" a canvas. There are, of course, early works that stand completely alone, without any qualification: a group of stunning interiors with large pedestal tables laden with still lifes, from the late 1930s; the rambunctious crayon drawings of Provincetown, from the 1940s; and notable works on paper all along the way. But the way was frequently circuitous and interrupted, even allowing for the lost works and the years when the rigors of running a school forced Hofmann to replace painting almost entirely with drawing.

The presence of the earliest work in the show, from the period before Hofmann came to America, is tantalizing. Nothing remains from those formative years in Paris when Hofmann's colleagues and friends were hatching Fauvism and Cubism and he was there to watch and respond. Almost nothing remains from the years in Munich, before the first trip to the U.S. Perhaps because of this gap—and despite the fits and starts with which Hofmann developed as a full-time painter—one of the strongest impressions of the show is of a distinct, unmistakable individual, no matter how various his approach. Even in a handful of student drawings, rather cramped and laborious renderings of the nude model, Hofmann's irrepressible intensity is present. He had a heavy hand, a virtual inability to hold back, and the little nudes he drew so carefully in 1898 bear the weight of that hand. (A small Cézanne-esque drawing of a young boy from about the same time sharply criticizes the others because of its lighter touch.) It's the same all-or-nothing quality that gives Hofmann's later paintings much of their potency and makes his color so recognizable—those raw, unmodulated slabs of brilliant orange and green and cobalt and blazing yellow. It gives the later works much of their aggressive presence and demanding visual weight, and makes his thin washes and occasional delicate passages seem doubly eloquent.

By 1902, the twenty-two-year-old Hofmann had learned something about Impressionism and Pointillism, and was dividing his color into spots and streaks, but he made even this highly systematic method into something personal. An alert self-portrait points to what he would become, as presciently as do the student drawings; the sleeve, hat band, and a framed picture on the wall conspire to create a surprising spatial complexity in the tightly focused little picture, while the bold spots of color pulse and flux. By 1914, according to the evidence of a few watercolors, the spots and dots had solidified into angular patches and planes, perhaps in response to Cézanne, perhaps to the Fauvists and Cubists, although Kokoschka and Klee come to mind before any French painter does. Already, in these early studies, it is possible to see characteristics that would remain with Hofmann until the end of his life: when he resists the temptation to include the full spectrum in a single picture, his color improves, and when he allows edge to function as line, without imposing a "harness" of containing strokes, his pictures are generally better. (In his later work, this regulating drawing can take the form of a tight grid-like structure that jams the picture and makes it inert, although when the drawing impulse breaks free as an arbitrary squiggle, things don't improve much.)

Greenberg has remarked, publicly and privately, that he finds Hofmann's work best when he "lets himself go," a condition more frequent, he maintains, when Hofmann used material he considered expendable or when the image itself was provisional or a study —in other words, when Hofmann apparently felt less was at stake and worried less about making Art. Greenberg is not alone in his preference; Hofmann's critics often faulted him for being too "French," for finishing and crafting his paintings too much for their avant-garde American taste. It's certainly true that the *seemingly* most spontaneous later works are often the best —it's frequently a function of scale, since working large forced or allowed Hofmann to be more economical and direct. But even in the watercolors of 1914, it's evident that he ends up with a tougher and more unexpected

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picture when, for example, he lets washes of greens and lavenders suggest landscape forms instead of delineating them, or when he gives himself up to the pleasures of a drift of red cadmium rooftops, scattered casually at the edge of a sheet, instead of calculating and composing in a more obvious way. A still life of 1921, a unique relic of the Munich years in the collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, is further proof of the point: it is stiff, congested, and airless, in contrast to a group of uninhibited, adventurous drawings made a few years later, obviously indebted to Picasso, but with Hofmann's typical hatching and stroking, and his typical intensity.

By the 1940s, in the selection at the Whitney, the differences between "expendable" works on paper and "precious" oil on canvas were often dramatic; Hofmann used the same strategy of open loops and a continuous "surround" in both media, but the gouaches are, without exception, loose, spontaneous, and full of energy, while the canvases can seem tight and overworked to the point where the notion of seeing through and into the picture, an implicit component of the paper works, disappears. Everything stays on the surface, an inert crust.

If the exhibition makes it relatively easy to pin down what made Hofmann "Hofmann," it makes it no easier to grasp his precise relation to the artists who are so frequently said to have influenced him. His large vertical tabletop still lifes of 1936 and 1937, for example, have been described as "perfectly Matissian," but they recall, far more than Matisse's work, Braque's large *Gueridons* of the 1920s, at least in their general conception and scale. In structure and color, they are quite distinct. Braque's tabletop paintings of this type are built of clearly defined, interlocking planes, often aggressively textured, but always held in a taut relationship to a shallow space that fluctuates a little in front and a little behind the surface of the canvas. Hofmann's still lifes are both flatter and more illusionistic, more about how saturated color is spread on a surface than about planar construction. The incipient illusionism of some of Hofmann's still-life objects, which both detach and embed themselves in the lush paint that surrounds them, does recall aspects of Matisse, although the paintings it calls up don't look anything like these big assertive tabletops, for Hofmann's vigorous loading of paint is wholly unlike Matisse's touch. The Matisses that come to mind are the exuberantly patterned horizontal still lifes where strongly modeled pitchers and fruit wrest an impossible space from a flat, arabesque ground. Then, too, there is the celebrated picture of a robust seated nude, ramrod-straight back cutting a fictive space out of a background of insistent flower-laden cartouches and patterned carpets.

The Whitney's muscular interior of 1950, *Magenta and Blue*, with its quadrapartite structure and spectacular range of different kinds of inventive drawing, raises further questions about Hofmann's relationship to Braque. While the clear, light-struck color is Hofmann's own, the structure of the picture, with the foreground occupied by a large studio table, divided into generous, geometric color planes, and a scattering of loosely defined objects across its surface, seems to have something to do with Braque's famous series of *Billiard Tables* of the 1940s, each with the playing surface angled and split in the same way that Hofmann angled and split the table in *Magenta and Blue*. The resemblance may be fortuitous, but Hofmann was certainly well informed about what his former colleagues in Paris were doing.

But Hofmann's color is not Matisse's, any more than his spatial conception is Braque's. Nor, despite the usual wisdom about Hofmann, is it, strictly speaking, Fauvist color. Hofmann uses all-out contrasts to shove planes apart, as the Fauves often did, but his edgy and abrasive palette is his alone, even in these relatively early pictures. Irving Sandler, in his excellent essay in the exhibition's catalogue, describes what he calls Hofmann's "bold palette": "Yet as much as his colors are opulent, they are also strong, dissonant and juxtaposed in jarring combinations," Sandler says, accurately. There's

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something peculiarly "Northern" and charged about Hofmann's color, the way German Expressionist color is. There's none of the rage of German Expressionism in Hofmann's work, none of the sense, so often present in the work of his compatriots, that Cubist form and Fauvist color have been literalized—that formal invention is really a depiction of deformation or an equivalent of violence done to the body— but Hofmann's color sometimes threatens to overwhelm us by its sheer brilliance and fullness, like a dish with an overpowering, pungent, and delicious taste.

The variousness of Hofmann's mature work, the refusal to make a single kind of picture that disturbed his contemporaries, seems less a problem than the mark of his forceful individuality. Yes, the pictures do range from loose accumulations of brushy strokes, such as the glowing *Festive Pink* (1959, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth N. Dayton), to crisply tailored arrangements of rectangles, such as *To Miz—Pax Vobiscum* (1964, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth), but that somehow seems less significant than their uniform intensity, their common pounding energy and their consistent physicality. Hofmann is supposed to have said, "I hate to repeat myself," but no matter how wide-ranging his inventions, they are always unmistakably "Hofmanns."

The variousness, in fact, seems unique to him, a natural result of his much discussed tendency to see everything in terms of dialectic extremes or, at least, his willingness to pursue all aspects of a given pictorial notion of their limits. Sometimes Hofmann combines extremes in a single painting, making the raw materials of painting the carriers of his cosmic polarities, going from fragile transparency to brutal opacity in a single passage, making infinitesimal deviations of edge and orientation into moments of high drama. At other times, he scrupulously separates out a variety of possibilities. Nothing gets lost or wasted. He is capable of expanding a small, apparently minor area of one painting into an independent, freshly conceived large-scale canvas.

He is also capable of systematically examining permutations without any compromise of emotional intensity. The potent *In Sober Ecstasy* (1965, Private Collection), with its darkly glowing colors and relentless piled-on strokes, explores the limits of complexity and layering, while the equally magnificent *Sun in the Foliage* (1964, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Graham Gund) could be described as a test of the boundaries of paring down, with its centralized block of luminous yellow hovering against a shifting "cloud" of dark, unstable reds and greens, but both pictures are so passionate and so downright ferocious that they seem dictated by pure intuition, rather than a lifetime's acquired expertise. Hofmann's best paintings seem so right, so sheerly inspired, that they make all of the rhetoric—his own and anyone else's—beside the point. (Conversely, when they appear too artful, too knowing, too *cuisiné*, they often fail.) A painting like *Flaming Lava* (1965, Private Collection), in which a densely stroked mass of blue-black seems to wrench itself free of its surroundings, spewing odd grays and greens as it goes, requires no discussion of push-pull theory, Hegelian oppositions, or any of the rest of it. It's like a block picture that has just exploded, leaving a residue of dense, tactile paint in an atmosphere of thinner washes. It explains exactly what Hofmann meant when he spoke of having to "sweat out Cubism," to free himself of the constricting vertical and horizontal axes, but it does so in a way that's as startling and untheoretical as a late Beethoven string quartet.

The exhibition and its catalogue, which contains informative, provocative essays by Dr. Goodman and Mr. Sandler and a reprint of a thoughtful 1961 essay by Clement Greenberg (not the one in *Art and Culture*), should help make perceptions of Hofmann clearer, but what has been called "the problem of Hofmann" still remains. (So does the problem of the catalogue plates, arranged in a sequence that eludes all logic and reason.) In his lifetime, Hofmann was somewhat isolated from his peers and colleagues

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by his age, his erratic command of English, his hardness of hearing, and the awe that his Europeanness inspired, but that still doesn't explain the resistance that his work met and continues to meet. If Americans have sometimes accused Hofmann of being too European, his German compatriots seem to regard him as an American—and not a very important one, at that. You'd expect the Germans to have claimed a painter of his stature as their own; Hofmann was born there and despite his frequent trips to France and Italy, left Germany for the U.S. only when he was fifty. But you can visit virtually every museum of modern art in the country without seeing a single Hofmann. The directors of an important gallery in Cologne tell me that they have been trying to interest German museum directors in Hofmann for years, with no success. In England, however, Hofmann seems to be the one "American" Abstract Expressionist whom it is acceptable to revere. It may have something to do with the rhetoric, since Newman and Rothko, who both come supported by a considerable amount of philosophizing, are also taken seriously. Hofmann's painting seems to have spoken directly to more than one generation of contemporary British painters; John Hoyland and Sheila Girling come to mind, along with many younger painters little known in this country such as Alan Gouk, Fred Pollock, and about a half dozen others. Even Howard Hodgkin's intimate and precious little pictures can be seen, in some respects, as aestheticized versions of some of Hofmann's notions. The phenomenon is particularly noteworthy, since Hofmann's super-saturated color is apparently at odds with the tonal nuances that dominate so much postwar British painting, but British interest extends beyond artists. The Tate Gallery organized a large show of Hofmann's paintings from the mid-Forties on, selected by John Hoyland, in 1988.

Hofmann has been extolled as a teacher because of the number of his students who remained serious, committed, practicing artists, and the impressive percentage of them who became well known. But there's also a fair amount of pretty awful art that has been made, in this country and elsewhere, seemingly in response to Hofmann's precepts. I suspect that little of this has anything to do with his teaching, but it is disconcerting to find anticipations of kitsch abstraction or worse in a Hofmann self-portrait of the early Forties, all artfully detached lines and coy implications. A young painter with whom I saw the show was deeply troubled by these correspondences, but in the end, Hofmann's energy and inventiveness won out. Given the increasing physicality of so much painting of the past decade, Hofmann's robust, materially forthright pictures should strike a sympathetic chord among painters working today. Hofmann pointed the way for a generation of American artists half a century ago and it would be nice to think that he could do it again.

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The contradictions of Terry Eagleton

by Roger Kimball

Chaucer was a class traitor
Shakespeare hated the mob
Donne sold out a bit later
Sidney was a nob
. . . . . .
There are only three names
To be plucked from this dismal set
Milton Blake and Shelley
Will smash the ruling class yet.
—Terry Eagleton,
"The Ballad of English Literature"

There have always been elements of ironic comedy about the spectacle of Marxist academics fervently proclaiming their revolutionary message while safely ensconced in Western institutions of higher education. As the years have passed and another generation of young radicals has settled into middle age, tenure, and pension calculations, one might have hoped that these freethinkers would have had manners enough to mute their demands for the destruction of the middle class, the bourgeoisie, "the repressive state apparatus of late capitalism," etc. After all, blue jeans or no blue jeans, what these middle-class beneficiaries of capitalism have unwittingly been clamoring for is nothing less than their own destruction. But no, they continue nattering on about "the contradictions of capitalism," obviously having missed the vastly more palpable contradiction inherent in their own position as tenured radicals.

The comedy has taken a new turn in the last year or two as history has caved in on the Marxist vision of the world. Though it is still touted by its adherents as the first really "scientific" view of society, we've had plenty of time to become inured to the dismal failure of Marxism to predict anything, even its own fatuousness. But the precipitous collapse of Communist regimes the world over would seem to present an unusually large embarrassment for the faithful. Wasn't it Marxism's largest boast to have dispensed —at last, finally—with all the illusions of idealism and to have presented us with an understanding of human life based on the nuts and bolts of historical necessity? A lot of good it does to subscribe to a materialist philosophy if it is consistently so glaringly wrong about the material world.

Yet no one acquainted with the intellectual habits of academic Marxists will be surprised to discover that they are as unfazed by contemporary world events as they always have been by their own tartuffian buffonery. Though Marxism is rapidly evaporating as a political force, it shows no signs of waning as an intellectual pastime in the academy. Predictably, the combination of academic egotism and Marxist self-righteousness has proved to be a potent talisman for keeping reality at bay. And, indeed, a further index of academic Marxism's passion for unreality is its recently acquired penchant for the obscurantist jargon of deconstruction, post-structuralism, multiculturalism, neo-Freudian feminism, and sundry other *ists* and *isms*. In the face of defeats in the real world, such

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intellectual gobbledygook has allowed Marxists to maintain their posture of chic radicalism. No longer confining themselves to jeremiads against the middle class and capitalism (though there are still plenty of those), they now often join their feminist, deconstructionist comrades in demanding the subversion of (say) the "white Eurocentric heterosexual phallocracy."

It would be lovely if we had the luxury of dismissing all this—deconstruction, multiculturalism, and so on, no less than academic Marxism—as bizarre self-canceling phenomena. We might then be tempted to construct a kind of menagerie where some of the more florid intellectual curiosities invented by the human race could be preserved, living cautionary tales for the citizenry at large. A necromancer, a follower of Paracelsus, a Freudian could be recruited to sport with the Lacanian feminist, the disciple of Jacques Derrida, the unreconstructed Marxist. To the objection that this sounds like nothing so much as the English faculty currently in place at any number of premier academic institutions, we can only concede the point. And there, of course, is the rub. For while academic Marxism may be a fertile source of unintended comedy, in its overall influence it is anything but funny. Together with the radical movements with which it has allied itself, it is responsible for transforming the humanities departments of many colleges and universities into the wastelands they are: bastions of intellectual conformity in which a ritual rejection of the social and spiritual achievements of Western civilization is *de rigueur*.

Among prominent academic Marxists in the humanities today, two names stand out: Fredric Jameson, who teaches literature at Duke University—currently one of the trendiest venues of intellectual anarchy in the American academy—and Terry Eagleton, a prolific British literary critic who teaches at Linacre College, Oxford. Both enjoy a wide and enthusiastic following and—in this country, anyway—great academic repute. Professor Jameson is perhaps the more "theoretical" (that is, deliberately obscure) of the two, Professor Eagleton the more adamant about declaring his working-class sympathies: In a typical gesture, he dedicated his book on the Brontës, *Myths of Power* (1975; second edition 1988), to "Dominic and Daniel and the working-class movement of West Yorkshire."

What the working-class movement of West Yorkshire (or anywhere else, for that matter) would have to say about a book that emphasizes the "notion of 'categorial structures' as key mediations between literary form, textual ideology and social relations" is amusing to contemplate. In any case, Professor Jameson tends to mingle with the working class only from the vertiginous eyrie provided by the work of such Marxist heroes as Georg Lukács, Theodor Adorno, Louis Althusser, and Walter Benjamin. Professor Eagleton draws sustenance from the same sources and is capable of writing just as barbarously as the next academic; but he is also capable of writing poems like "The Ballad of English Literature," which furnishes our epigraph and which—we learn in the preface to *Against the Grain*, his 1986 collection of essays—is "a fragment" from his "other life" as "an occasional writer and performer of political songs." I intend to examine Professor Jameson's contribution to the current intellectual debacle in another essay. Here, I wish to take the occasion of the publication of Terry Eagleton's new book, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*[1]—at 426 pages, two or three times as long as his many other books and clearly meant to be something of a *magnum opus*—to discuss the evolution and significance of his distinctive brand of Marxist criticism.

Born in 1943, Professor Eagleton was educated at Cambridge University, where he studied with the Marxist critic Raymond Williams and where he taught briefly before going to Wadham College, Oxford, in 1969. If we strip away the accretions of fashionable academic rhetoric—an increasingly prom-

1 *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, by Terry Eagleton; Basil Blackwell, 426 pages, $49.95; $17.95 paper.

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inent feature of his work since the mid-Seventies—we see the origins of Professor Eagleton's criticism in a compound of Williams's socialist organicism, F. R. Leavis's meticulously autocratic practical criticism, and left-wing, liberationist Catholicism. His early work, especially, was written under Williams's shadow. *Shakespeare and Society* (1967) is dedicated to Williams, "without whose friendship and influence this book would not have been written." In its main theme—the relation of the individual and society as it emerges in Shakespeare's late plays—it rehearses in smaller compass the kind of analysis Williams undertook in *Culture and Society* (1958). As is the case with Williams, Professor Eagleton apparently cannot write a work on any subject without an exhibition of his political *bona fides*. At the end of this book on Shakespeare, we are confronted with the suggestion that "spontaneous living is crippled by industrial capitalism," just as Williams concludes *Culture and Society* with a plea for the achievement of a socialist-based "common culture" because "we shall not survive without it."

Professor Eagleton subsequently learned that organic models of society are politically suspect and went out of his way to distance himself—respectfully, it must be said—from Williams. In *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (1976), he criticizes Williams for his "political gradualism" and "populism," even his "humanism" and "idealism," while also praising his work as "one of the most significant sources from which a materialist aesthetics might be derived." What is remarkable, though, is not Professor Eagleton's criticism of his mentor but how much the very things he criticizes continue, despite protestations to the contrary, to inform his own work.

The same cannot be said for the influence of Leavis or of Catholicism. Indeed, religion in general persists in Professor Eagleton's work mostly in the form of certain rhetorical tics and occasional recourse to millenarian imagery. Sample: "Lenin was in exile, but would come again on clouds of glory with the future bulging in his pockets to judge the quick and the dead."[2] By the mid-Seventies Professor Eagleton is arguing from the "'taken-for-granted' post-atheism of Marx." (Whether such a position differs significantly from the left-wing, activist Catholicism of his youth is a question we must leave to one side.)

The sobering influence of Leavis's practical criticism had approximately the same fate in Professor Eagleton's criticism as did religion: it is gradually forgotten as he moves away from being a mere literary critic to assume the fashionable mantle of Marxist "critical theorist." The main difference is that for the literary critic, literature—actual, specific works of literature—remains the chief focus of his endeavors, whereas for the critical theorist literature takes a back seat to quasi-philosophical speculations about epistemology, sex, society, politics: anything but literature. Individual literary works come into the picture, in so far as they do come into the picture, only as illustrations of the theory being advanced. In *Shakespeare and Society*, Professor Eagleton insists that his discussion of the relation between the individual and society "needs to be above all a work of practical criticism, where the general assertion can be sustained by actual reference." By 1976, he is complaining that "bourgeois criticism," content with its role

2 This is from Professor Eagleton's novel *Saints and Scholars* (1987), a tediously didactic tale set in 1916. The plot centers on the arrest and execution of James Connolly, a leader of the Irish insurgency. That true-life story provides the political core of the book. The academic embroidery is supplied by Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Nikolai Bakhtin, a friend of Wittgenstein's and elder brother of the currently fashionable literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. All three are characters in the book. Professor Eagleton reproduces various well-known anecdotes about Russell and Wittgenstein and transposes Wittgenstein and Bakhtin out to the west coast of Ireland so that they can encounter Connolly. Despite its bludgeoning political message—the English are pigs, the Irish noble freedom fighters—the book is terribly "literary," including even a brief appearance by Leopold Bloom from Joyce's *Ulysses*.

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as "handmaiden" to literature, does not stand up to "the inexhaustible godhead of the text itself." And by the time he comes to write *The Ideology of the Aesthetic,* he explicitly rejects the idea that "theory" should refer to particular works and boasts straightway that his study will not include "any examination of actual works of art."

At the center of Marxist thought is a vision of the world determined by economic imperatives: the economic "base" of society determines the cultural "superstructure" of politics, art, religion, and so on. Like most academic Marxists, Professor Eagleton knows that, put baldly, the doctrine of economic determinism is patently absurd. So he employs various gambits to soften or conceal the absurdity, without ever really denying the basic model of economic determinism. This is not to say that he is completely free of "vulgar Marxist" rhetoric; indeed, he sometimes sounds like nothing so much as a soapbox Marxist, railing (for example) against "a petty bourgeois liberal humanism, academically dispossessed and subordinated yet in intellectual terms increasingly hegemonic, [which] occupied the bastions of reactionary criticism from within as a dissentient bloc."

Yet Professor Eagleton also takes great pains to distance himself from "vulgar Marxism"—the phrase occurs often in his works, always in his beloved scare quotes. The vulgar Marxist is a frank economic determinist and holds that the "superstructure" is a more or less direct reflection of economic processes. The sophisticated Marxist, well schooled in the writings of the Frankfurt School Marxists, allows that the superstructure is "relatively autonomous"—except when he wants to claim economic determination for some phenomenon of his own choosing. The "vulgar Marxist" is frankly utopian and looks forward to the revolution and the establishment of a workers' paradise; a sophisticated Marxist like Professor Eagleton dandifies his utopianism with lots of high-flown rhetoric. "Once emancipated from material scarcity, liberated from labour," he writes in a typically starry-eyed passage, "[men] will live in the play of the mutual significations, move in the ceaseless 'excess' of freedom."

Professor Eagleton's primary weapons against the charge of vulgar Marxism are words like "hegemony," "ideology," and "aesthetic," all of which in his hands have the wonderful property of meaning any of about six different and conflicting things. He is especially slippery in his use of the term ideology, an old Marxist standby that was given new life by the French Marxist Louis Althusser. When he *defines* "ideology," he is usually careful to cast his definition in fairly neutral terms. In *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), for example, he writes that "by 'ideology' I mean, roughly, what the ways in which what we say and believe connects with the power-structure and power-relations of the society we live in." In at least one place, he even tells us that "there is no reason to suppose . . . that 'ideology' need always be a pejorative term." But of course he *uses* it as a pejorative term, as this somewhat franker description of the function of ideology hints at: "the function of ideology ... is to legitimate the power of the ruling class in society."

To appreciate the corrosive nature of Professor Eagleton's use of the notion of ideology, consider his explanation of how a Marxist might use the term to analyze *The Waste Land.* Predictably, the poem appears as a reflection of a "crisis" of bourgeois imperialism (everything bourgeois is always in crisis for the Marxist), but "as a poem, it does not of course *know itself* as a product of a particular ideological crisis, for if it did it would cease to exist. . . . In this sense *The Waste Land* is ideological: it shows a man making sense of his experience in ways that prohibit a true understanding of his society, ways that are consequently false." How, one might ask, does Professor Eagleton know they are false? What puts him in a position superior to poor T.S. Eliot, blinded as he was by ideology? Why, the magic key, of course: Marxist doctrine. Ideology may simply be "the ideas, values and feelings by which men experience their societies at various times," but the Marxist is in the uniquely happy position of being

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exempt from the blinders of ideology. As Professor Eagleton explains, "historical materialism"—that is, Marxism—"stands or falls by the claim that it is not only not an ideology, but that it contains a scientific theory of the genesis, structure and decline of ideologies."

Professor Eagleton expatiates further on the notion of ideology in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. He spends his introductory chapter attempting to convince readers that the idea of literature is so indeterminate that, when you come right down to it, "literature" (the scare quotes are his) doesn't exist. What we have are the products of various "social ideologies." Perhaps you thought that George Eliot was the author of *Middlemarch*. No: according to Professor Eagleton,

> The phrase "George Eliot" signifies nothing more than the insertion of certain specific ideological determinations—Evangelical Christianity, rural organicism, incipient feminism, petty-bourgeois moralism—into a hegemonic ideological formation which is partly supported, partly embarrassed by their presence.

Similarly, he tells us that Henry James, like Joseph Conrad, "is . . . no more than a particular name for . . . an aspect of the crisis of nineteenth-century realism." The idea is to downgrade the notion of individual genius, as if George Eliot's personal contribution to the writing of *Middlemarch* were somehow accidental, the more important thing being the "specific ideological determinations" she embodied. The main point of all this is that nothing is what it seems; or, as Professor Eagleton puts it in *Criticism and Ideology*, "there is no 'immanent' value": everything in the realm of culture is determined by something outside culture—namely (catch that whiff of vulgarity?) the oppressive economic relations of capitalism.

In *Literary Theory*, Professor Eagleton argues that the "*point*" of studying literature "is not itself, in the end, a literary one." Now there is a sense in which "bourgeois criticism," as he likes to call it, would agree. And in this context it is worth noting that when we insist on the basic *autonomy* of art, we do not suggest that art exists in a vacuum, apart from any human values or concerns; we mean, rather, that art should not be pursued as a species of propaganda but as realm of experience that possesses its own criteria of validity. Finally, "in the end," the "*point*" of studying literature is "outside" literature, just as the point of reading—and understanding what is read—is outside the act of reading. This is what we mean when, for example, we say that studying literature is enriching, that it broadens our horizons, that it deepens our understanding.

Professor Eagleton scoffs at the "liberal humanist" idea that literature "makes you a better person" because such formulations are too vague, too idealistic, too "abstract" (this latter being a favorite Marxist criticism). What he wants is a program. But there are times when vagueness and abstractness are virtues. When Rilke ends his famous sonnet on the archaic bust of Apollo with the admonition *Du musst dein Leben ändern* —"You must change your life"—we are in fact as grateful for its vagueness as we are for its enspiriting challenge. We know perfectly well what the demand to change one's life means. Yet for Professor Eagleton, as for all professing Marxists, the experience of art is incomplete when it is "only" about beauty or "only" involves a moment of self-recognition. They want art to issue specific instructions: contemplating that antique fragment of sculpture we should realize that its message is "You must overthrow the ruling class" or at least "You must realize that the social order that gave birth to this sculpture was oppressive."

In the end, Professor Eagleton is in the uncomfortable position of being a literary critic who doesn't care much for literature except in so far as it is an instrument for social change. He begins *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976)—a brief, hagiographic primer written to accompany the far more abstruse speculations contained in *Criticism and Ideology*—with the requisite paean to Marx's general brilliance and profound grasp of culture: Marx wrote poetry, "his acquain-

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tance with literature . . . was staggering in scope," and so on. It all might have come from the Soviet Encyclopedia *circa* 1930. But Professor Eagleton goes on immediately to note that one shouldn't expect a full-fledged theory of art from Marxism because, after all, "Marx and Engels had rather more important tasks on their hands than the formulation of a complete aesthetic theory."

In many respects, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* is a summary and update of Professor Eagleton's views on the relation between aesthetic experience and ideology. (In this sense, it might just as well have been titled *The Aesthetics of Ideology*.) But it is also something of an historical overview of philosophical thinking about aesthetics from the eighteenth century down to the present. Despite Professor Eagleton's disclaimer that he was not attempting to provide a history of aesthetics, that is largely what the book amounts to, and we can be sure that it will be adopted as such by many colleges and universities. It gives special emphasis to Marxist critics like Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, and it includes provocative chapter titles like "Schiller and Hegemony" and "The Marxist Sublime"; but otherwise it provides a fairly predictable trip through the literature. Beginning with the work of Alexander Baumgarten—who coined the term "aesthetic" in 1750—Professor Eagleton takes fourteen chapters to rehearse the aesthetic theories of Burke, Shaftsbury, Kant, Schiller, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and others. Mostly, the names are as familiar as the opinions Professor Eagleton expresses. Indeed, by the time one comes to "From the *Polis* to Postmodernism," the longest and most original chapter, one has the distinct impression of having just sat through Professor Eagleton's latest batch of homework assignments to himself.

As usual, the sheer bulk of the assignments is formidable. Professor Eagleton has read a great deal and has clearly devoted much effort to the book. Yet considered as an introduction to aesthetic theory, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* is a dismal failure. For one thing, notwithstanding his prodigious reading, Professor Eagleton is often not up to the task of explaining the philosophy he discusses—largely, one suspects, because of his ideological commitments. For example, Baumgarten's aesthetic theory, growing out of the work of philosophers like Leibniz and Christian Wolff, was essentially an effort to supplement the rationalism of Cartesian thought by providing a fuller account of the "sensuous perfection" that was embodied in art. As logic was to the faculty of reason, so aesthetics was to the faculty of taste. But for Professor Eagleton, "the call for an aesthetics in eighteenth-century Germany is among other things a response to the problem of political absolutism." His discussion of Baumgarten's aesthetics transforms a philosophical innovation into a dramatic example of class warfare with reason cast as the tyrant and aesthetics as a kind of proletarian lackey. "Reason," he writes, "must find some way of penetrating the world of perception, but in doing so must not put at risk its own absolute power"—as if reason were a feudal lord oppressing the "serfs" of sensation.

Then, too, in his eagerness to uphold the universality of class warfare, Professor Eagleton often drastically misreads the philosophers he discusses. About Schopenhauer's extreme pessimism, for example, he writes that it is "a fact that throughout class history the fate of the great majority of men and women has been one of suffering and fruitless toil. . . . The dominant tale of history to date has indeed been one of carnage, misery and woe." But this is totally to misunderstand Schopenhauer, for whom suffering and woe were essential, irremediable aspects of existence, not the products of "class history." Sometimes, indeed, Professor Eagleton's explanations take on a positively surreal quality, especially when he ventures into modish literary theorizing. Consider this piece of gibberish: "Kant's Oedipal protectiveness towards the maternal body places the real reverently out of bounds, prohibiting that impious coupling of subject and object for which Hegel's dialectical programme will clamour."

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To all this Professor Eagleton might reply that, first, he was not attempting to present a standard history of aesthetics and, second, that his real interest is in the way the aesthetic embodies the contradictions of the middle class under capitalism. This brings us to one of Professor Eagleton's central claims in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic,* namely, the whole idea of the aesthetic is based on or embodies a "contradiction." One must always be suspicious when a Marxist uses the term "contradiction," because it usually means that some aspect of reality is not conforming to his vision of things. Thus the contradictions of capitalism: they are contradictions only so long as you measure capitalism by a Marxist model of historical necessity. Minus that, capitalism is merely a complex economic process that, like everything else in the real world, refuses to accommodate itself to the predictions of philosophers.

Professor Eagleton holds that the aesthetic is "contradictory" because aesthetic experience gestures toward a freedom usually denied to man while at the same time it embodies the ideological imperatives of the ruling class. Hence the aesthetic is both "the ideal paradigm of material production" and "the very paradigm of the ideological" —indeed, he tells us that "aesthetic judgement is every bit as coercive as the most barbarous law" though "this is not the way it feels." Now, at least since the time of the Greeks, art has been held up as a source of great spiritual refreshment, so it is no surprise that Marxists, too, should single it out as a model for "unalienated labor." But why should we grant that the aesthetic is fundamentally ideological? If nothing in our experience suggests that it is—and nothing does—why should we cede art and aesthetic experience to Marxist theory?

The Ideology of the Aesthetic is a deeply confused work that tells us almost nothing about art or aesthetic experience. It is more revealing on the subject of ideology, but mostly an example of ideology in action, not as an explanation or analysis of the phenomenon. Yet it must be admitted that there is an unusually perceptive critic lurking in the interstices of this book. Professor Eagleton is not very good as an expositor of philosophy, and his ruling passions—to be politically correct and to be intellectually fashionable—regularly lead him into any number of silly statements.

But his last chapter, especially, shows him to be capable of trenchant and perceptive criticism. True, this chapter contains the usual quota of Marxist hooey. Yet it also contains a some perceptive criticism of a subject that is clearly dear to Professor Eagleton's heart: Marxist criticism. For one thing, Professor Eagleton makes what he rightly calls the "vital distinction" between liberal capitalistic society and totalitarian regimes: This in itself is a welcome change from the typical academic Marxist tactic of pretending that the United States is a recapitulation of Hitler's Reich. But even more to the point, he even ventures to criticize several chic left-wing theories and their proponents. Thus he warns his fellow academics against the deconstructionist attack on the notion of truth, noting that it is not the case that "ambiguity, indeterminability, undecidability are always subversive strikes against an arrogantly monological certitude." You might think this could be taken for granted; but in the prevailing climate in the academy, to challenge the triumph of undecidability and ambiguity is to risk the charge of heresy.

Professor Eagleton also dares to characterize thinkers like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida as "libertarian pessimists," and to suggest that Foucault underestimated the Enlightenment's "vital civilising achievements." He makes similar observations about other left-wing academic saints, from Jürgen Habermas to the exalted Fredric Jameson. Perhaps it is this side of Professor Eagleton that the historian Maurice Cowling had in mind when he spoke of his "intellectual brutality." In any event, though it is rarely on view in his work, such critical independence is to be encouraged. The real treat, of course, would be to have *this* Terry Eagleton give us an analysis of the Terry Eagleton who writes "Milton Blake and Shelley/ Will smash the ruling class yet."

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Visiting the Gregorys

by Robert Phillips

"Visiting the Gregorys," Hortense Calisher once remarked, "was like sitting at the fount of literature." She and her husband, Curtis Harnack, called upon Horace Gregory and his wife, Marya Zaturenska, for many years. As did I and my wife, Judith Bloomingdale, and many others. The experience was unforgettable. Literary fashions and reputations change so quickly in America—remember Southern Gothic? The Beats? Black Humor? The New York School of Poets?—that it may be difficult for some to remember how important the Gregorys were. Marya won a Pulitzer Prize, Horace won the Bollingen, and their co-edited anthologies and co-written history of American poetry influenced and sometimes infuriated generations. Horace especially was a formidable figure, reviewing books in important quarterlies, serving on prize committees; of the two reputations, his endured longer. In her last decades, Marya lived in his shadow. He was a grand old man of letters, she a figure from the past. When one visited them, however, there was no evidence of their prior "importance." What impressed one was the breadth of their knowledge and depth of their reading. This is what occasioned Hortense Calisher's remark. They were among what Arnold Bennett called "the passionate few" who sustained literature.

I met Marya first. I was at a party at the Gotham Book Mart on June 26, 1968, celebrating the publication of a new novel by James T. Farrell. Farrell and Gregory had been close friends for decades. I was standing beside Farrell and his companion, Cleo Paturis, when the latter exclaimed, "Jimmy, isn't that Marya?" Indeed it was. She had managed to make the trip from their home in Palisades, in Rockland County, New York—no small feat, since she did not drive, there were no trains, and buses were infrequent. Mr. Gregory had not come.

It was Farrell who introduced me to Mrs. Gregory. I expressed an appreciation for her work, which I first read while an undergraduate in Louis Untermeyer's anthology *Modern American Poetry*. I also mentioned publication of her *Collected Poems*, three years before. "Oh," she said quietly. "I thought that was one of America's best-kept secrets!" She exaggerated. The book had been reviewed, among other places, in *The New York Times Book Review*. Barbara Guest wrote that "Marya Zaturenska upholds the acclaim that has been given her, and even surpasses it . . . . It must be said that rarely has this [Pulitzer] prize recognized poetry of such delicacy and grace."

We spent part of that evening chatting, and immediately I perceived a vivacious side to the dark-haired, dark-eyed poet. Before

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Quotations from the correspondence of the Gregorys are published by permission of the executor of the estate, Patrick B. Gregory. The original letters are on deposit at the George Arents Research Library for Special Collections, Syracuse University.

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she departed, she offered an invitation to visit in Palisades. She would write me, she said. An invitation was issued promptly. One Saturday my wife and I drove from northern Westchester County. Crossing the Hudson, then winding south on Route 9-W on the west side of the river, we stopped to ask directions at a filling station. The attendant knew where the Gregory house was. Eventually we found it, a white eighteenth-century cottage with turquoise shutters and a white picket fence. It sat close to the road. A profusion of day lilies and rambling roses grew in front.

When I knocked, it seemed a long time before the door was opened.

"I hope you're good at lifting things," Marya said by way of greeting.

"What do you want lifted?"

"Why, Mr. Gregory."

She ushered us through the house. We'd gone to the front door, rarely used; subsequently we always used the side door, which led into the kitchen. We passed through the parlor and into the dining room. We discovered Horace Gregory sitting in his wheelchair at the dining-room table, thumbing through a large history book. He was then, and every time I ever saw him, impeccably dressed in jacket, dress shirt, and tie.

He did not appear to need "lifting" anywhere. "Can you wheel Horace into the drawing room? Then we'll have tea," Marya said. We shook hands with the gentleman, who tilted his head and gave us each a long and friendly gaze. His was one of the kindest gazes I've ever seen. In the middle of his forehead was a wen, which gave the impression of a third eye.

I pushed Horace into "the drawing room," where a fire expertly had been laid. I never was to know who laid them—Marya, or one of the boys who came each morning to get Mr. Gregory out of bed, dressed, and into his chair for the day, repeating the performance in reverse at night. Horace was dead weight below the waist, too much for Marya to lift. This was the result of a complicated medical history, not the least of which was having been born with tuberculosis of the bone, which had affected his upper vertebrae, and paralysis of the left hand and foot. He didn't walk until he was sixteen, a fact he considered so insignificant that he didn't mention it in the first draft of his autobiography, *The House on Jefferson Street* (1971). What was really important, he felt, was not his health but rather the people he met, the thoughts he had. Marya made him add one tiny footnote about the T.B. In his young manhood and middle age, he walked with a lurch. Later, an operation seemed to be restoring him to a normal gait. But then a fall, a broken hip, and complications left him in the wheelchair.

The low-ceilinged house was lined with books, including the stairwells, and, as I was later to see, the bedrooms and especially the attic. These were not just books, these were treasures: the classics (Horace had produced translations of Ovid and Catullus that would remain in print to this day); French, English, Russian, and German literature; and tons of poetry, both ancient and contemporary. Certain of their writing friends were accustomed to sending them inscribed copies of their latest. There were signed volumes by Samuel Beckett, E. E. Cummings, Dame Edith Sitwell, Robert Lowell, and Farrell, to name just a few. There was also a fine collection of Irish literature, housed in the enclosed back porch which was Horace's study. (Marya wrote in her bedroom overhead.) I recall first editions of Yeats and Lady Gregory. In the dining room, one bookcase contained a single copy of each of Marya's and Horace's own books. In his lifetime he wrote eighteen, translated three, and edited eight. She wrote nine, edited three, and together they collaborated on four. The walls also held original paintings, including two watercolors by Cummings. Her bed was covered by a spread imitating the unicorn tapestries.

Tea that first day, and many afternoons after, consisted of smoked oysters on crackers, cheeses, and a choice of tea or sherry. If it was late in the afternoon, whiskey would be produced if the guests desired—Paddy's

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Irish Whiskey. At this time in his life, Horace rarely drank more than one ceremonial glass of champagne on special occasions; he swore alcohol wasn't good to mix with his "goofballs" (his medication). On the tea table was a lacquered box Marya identified as a gift from their grandson, purchased in Damascus.

If the invitation was to supper, Marya would always have done the cooking, though it would be served and cleared by Leona, an admirable black woman from nearby Sparkill. Leona would wait table and do her best to fend off Piccolo, the Gregorys' voracious black-and-white tomcat. Marya was an excellent cook. I recall a spicy stuffed breast of veal and creamed celery. She had a way with vegetables. Afterward Leona would do the dishes while the four of us sat around the dining-room table and talked.

What talk there was! They both loved wit and humor, and they laughed a great deal over human foibles. He'd cock his head to one side and chuckle. Hers was more of a belly laugh, unexpected from one so ladylike. Horace liked to discuss ideas and movements and history and current politics. Marya preferred literary gossip. Since both had been out of the literary mainstream for some years, her gossip frequently was rather stale—shenanigans allegedly perpetrated by "La Bogan" (Louise Bogan), "Blab-it Deutsch" (Babette Deutsch, whom, according to Marya, Dame Edith Sitwell called "the worst poet in existence"), "Robert Pen Wiper" (Robert Penn Warren), "Richard the Eberhart," "Carl Sandbag," and so on. Often she would launch into some story and Horace would cut her off.

"Now Marya," he would say patiently, "we don't want to repeat *that* story. That was a long time ago, and besides, I'm not sure it was true."

"Every word of it. I had it from an impeccable source."

"Well, *don't* repeat it." Horace's *No* was one of the firmest I've ever heard.

"I don't see why not," she'd say resignedly, and light another cigarette, of which she smoked far too many. She inhaled them with a pout. Usually her smoking was interrupted by a loud, hacking cough. When uninterrupted, she talked nonstop, telling the most astounding stories: how "Randy" Jarrell presumably wrote a faculty committee, which was considering Horace for a job, that Horace was far too ill to teach —then swooped down and grabbed the job for himself; how "Ted" Roethke allegedly tried to push Horace down a flight of marble stairs in Rome . . .

There may have been some truth to these tales. American poets are notoriously competitive. But I think Marya simply spent too many hours alone with her thoughts, rehearsing literary grudges and neglect. Hers was the kind of existence Horace described in his early poem "Interior: The Suburbs," which begins, "There is no rest for the mind/in a small house," and continues,

> for there are many miles to walk in the small house,
> traveling past the same chairs, the same tables,
> the same glassy portraits on the walls,
> flowing into darkness.

That there was animosity against them cannot be denied. A look at Louise Bogan's selected letters shows that "La Bogan" carried a considerable grudge. In a letter to Morton Dauwen Zabel, she described a party at Sarah Lawrence: "And over in a corner, coiled up in snake-like dignity, were no other than our two serpent friends: Marya and Horace."

Marya always claimed this ill will was due to her winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1937, the year Bogan published her third collection, *The Sleeping Fury*. Over the years I heard the story several times: how the prize was originally to go to Bogan, but one of the jurors leaked the news to her in advance. Bogan then went about New York telling people she was getting it, and word got back to the committee, who reconvened, reconsidered, and gave it instead to Marya—a relatively unknown voice at the time. The Gregorys claimed all this is documented in a

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Leonard Lyons newspaper column. It is possible. A similar leak deprived Mark Strand of the Pulitzer just a few years ago.

There was another cause of rancor which alienated the Gregorys, not only from Bogan but from a sizable portion of a generation of American poets. I refer, of course, to their *History of American Poetry, 1900-1940.* Coleridge warned us never to criticize living writers, because to do so was to walk on burning ground. The Gregorys made some extraordinarily candid assessments of their contemporaries. Of Bogan, they (Marya?) wrote:

> A fierce, almost frightening rhetoric and an unguarded love of passionate pagan sentiment seemed to overwhelm her verse, especially in its later phases. As one rereads *The Sleeping Fury* (1937), one is impressed by a tone of voice which more closely resembles that of a lady "commando" than of Gautier.

Of John Malcolm Brinnin, they stated, "like Muriel Rukeyser's gift, Brinnin's brilliant promise seems half concealed in poetic activity rather than in the actual writing of poetry."

Horace rarely talked about his own books, but Marya often defended the *History* in our conversations. "It was a true *history*," she would say, "and it will never go out of date, because it provides a reliable background for the present scene. The books which Randy Jarrell and Blab-it Deutsch threw together afterward—attempting to imitate it or rival it—were jokes. They merely stuffed together all their old book reviews! They had no idea what history was, or any sense of poetic tradition and its historical meaning. A true history was totally out of their grasp."

Despite excesses, the Gregorys' *History*, published in 1946, does remain a useful book today. It is unique and lively, clear and civilized, and exudes a youthful quality of gaiety and naughtiness. They were naïve to publish it without expecting controversy and resentment. Their approach was singular. They wrote of an era that only a few had assessed until then. Historical criticism had dropped out of fashion by the 1940s. The Gregorys went back and took a fresh look at books no one bothered to regard anymore.

They revaluated the significance of such poets as Joaquin Miller, Edwin Markham, George Sterling, even James Whitcomb Riley! They considered George Santayana as a poet, based upon three forgotten volumes then out of print. They took seriously the neglected Lizette Reese and Adelaide Crapsey, while putting down the celebrated Laura Riding as "an industrious, earnest, and ungifted amateur." They elevated Robinson Jeffers while dethroning Mark Van Doren, praised Hart Crane while damning Conrad Aiken. Today most of their judgments seem sound. They were among the first to recognize the poetic genius of Weldon Kees, and they were early admirers of Winfield Townley Scott. Their championing the poetry of Frederic Prokosch was an act of admirable independence. Altogether the *History*, for which they'd spent their lives reading, took five years of research, a year of writing, and another year of checking and rechecking dates, quotations, and details.

The first of many books the Gregorys gave me was a paperback edition of one of their anthologies, *The Silver Swan* (1966). It was a compilation of poems of romance and mystery, many of them short lyrics and songs. Their anthologies revealed the same independence from critical fashion displayed in their *History*. In their pages one encounters such unfamiliar poets as George Petrie (1798-1866), Francis Ledwidge (1891-1917), Gerard Labrunie (1808-1855), Mrs. Rachel Annand Taylor (1876-1960), Judith Gautier (1850-1917), and David Schubert (1913-1946).

After Holt published their first collaborative anthology, *The Crystal Cabinet* (subtitled "An Invitation to Poetry"), in 1962, there appeared *The Golden Journey* (subtitled "Poems for Young People"), edited by none other than Louise Bogan, with William Jay Smith. Marya always claimed the book was "an imitation" of their own, but shrugged it off with the words, "Well, there's more where that came from!" She

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was quoting a remark of William Carlos Williams's upon seeing an imitation of one of his own poems.

A story told several times by Marya was how Horace—acting as a poetry judge in a contest run by Houghton Mifflin—had "rescued from the wastebasket" the manuscript of Elizabeth Bishop's first collection, *North & South* (1946), and given it the prize and publication. Wastebasket aside, this is true. The other judges had made up their minds to give the award to another young woman ("A Powers model," according to Marya, "who hated Auden and had joined the Communist party"). Horace was thoroughly familiar with the Bishop manuscript; earlier he had tried to get Harcourt to publish it. He had a fight on his hands, but he made the other Houghton readers look at the Bishop manuscript again. The prize established her career.

During the years I knew Horace, his wheelchair days, he was less enthusiastic about Bishop's poetry. Not her early work—he was convinced of its distinction. But he was worried about her poems written during the 1960s and 1970s. He felt they had become too "occasional," too much like the drawings in the magazine in which they most often appeared, *The New Yorker*. He felt it was not good light verse, and that she had a tendency toward a fatal cuteness. Marya, on the other hand, labeled later Bishop poems "high camp." I disagreed with both views.

Another poet often discussed was Muriel Rukeyser. Marya had befriended the younger poet during the 1930s, and dedicated *Cold Morning Sky* to her. Rukeyser in turn dedicated "Night-Music" to Marya. But both Gregorys came to feel they had nothing in common with this poet of protest. They found her manner too demanding, too pushy, and her later poems dishonest and politically misinformed. Finally they avoided her—until, in a moment of weakness, Marya received her in 1971.

At the time, Horace was back in the hospital with an intestinal obstruction. His life was saved then and before by a diagnosis by Dr. John Prutting, an internist from Manhattan with more than a touch of genius. Horace was hospitalized in Nyack, and his room overlooked a cemetery—an irony that did not escape him. Carson McCullers had died in this same hospital four years before. While Horace was in the hospital, Marya had a hemorrhage of some kind. Rukeyser showed up in Palisades, full of sympathy and with a car. She took Marya to a doctor. Rukeyser was, in Marya's words, "two hundred pounds of vitality and energy and benevolence." She showered Marya with affection and praised her new poems, about which Marya had had doubts.

Rukeyser was helpful, but Marya felt she caught her out in several lies. It does seem Rukeyser was given to embroidering the truth. According to the Gregorys, she alternately attributed the fatherhood of her son to Robinson Jeffers, William Carlos Williams, and finally Albert Einstein. Marya always said with great satisfaction, "Well, the boy always looked just like Louis Untermeyer to me!" During these lonely months, Marya enjoyed the younger poet's company. Rukeyser made her laugh, and laughter and amusement were rare in her later life. But while laughing, she claimed she felt like a hypnotized rabbit before a powerful force of nature. Finally, she did not respect Rukeyser's work. If she had respected the work, she said, she could have forgiven a great deal.

Horace was outspoken against the so-called "confessional poetry" of Lowell, Berryman, Plath, Roethke, and Sexton—all very fashionable then. This was no surprise. Horace was not a confessional writer, and neither were his Latin mentors, Horace and Lucretius. His literary debts were to the classics, and to Hardy, Pope, Eliot, and Pound—though he evolved his own cast of characters and style. A reading of his poem "Full Fathom Five," from his last book, *Another Look* (1976), shows how he felt about the confessional school. The poem features a protagonist eager to tell, and tell again, "how fate had made him/animal, lunatic/failure, fraud, and evident criminal." In the book Horace followed that poem

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with "Death & Empedocles," employing the Greek who leaped into a volcano in hopes of attaining fame—the ultimate act of egotism—as a figure for the likes of Berryman and Plath, whom he claimed had "an Empedocles complex."

One evening Horace held forth on how this group of confessional poets came into being. "It all started with Freud, you see? Freud and the loss of faith in Christ. They deified the analyst's couch. What they suffer is an unwritten doctrine, 'To be a great poet you have to be crazy.' That's nonsense, of course. You see?" He leaned forward in his wheelchair and gazed at you. For a moment, you saw.

Sometimes the Gregorys would talk about their pasts. Rather, Marya would. Horace rarely discussed personal matters. His self-regard came from inner pride. Marya would talk about her background of poverty, as a Russian immigrant's daughter who came to the States at the age of eight. In Russia her mother had sewn clothes and dolls for the children of the Radziwills. Her family settled on Henry Street in Manhattan, and Marya worked in factories while attending high school at night. She met Horace at the University of Wisconsin, where she was on scholarship and he was a student of means. (His grandfather was one of the founders of the university.)

The Gregory family did not accept Marya as Horace's equal. They also told him that she was after his money: "Why else would a pretty girl want to marry a sick boy?" When Horace married her, he turned his back on the family money. Thus the only member with an infirmity cut himself off from the family. It was one of many acts of courage.

Marya loved beautiful and elegant things. Once she complimented my wife on her dress with the remark, "There's nothing prettier than a pretty girl in a pretty lace collar!" Poverty was the subject of some of her best poems, including "Variation on a Polish Folk Song" and "The Daisy," in which the protagonist can have any flower, but chooses a daisy:

> Of all this beauty felt and seen and heard
> I can be frugal and devout and plain,
> Deprived so long of light and air and grass.
> The shyest flower is sweetest to uncover.

Another theme in her best poetry is that of dispossession, of alienation, which might be traced to her family background. "The Castaways" is a magnificent poem, one which Auden admired. "The Virgin, the Doe, and the Leper" rhetorically asks, "For are we not lost, too?/Are we not outcasts from time's living flood?" It is instructive that the images she most often used were the rich staples of lyric poetry—roses, moonlight, columns, nymphs, and the like. But in life, she was a realist. She related with zest her momentary terror when a necklace chain she was wearing got caught in the machinery as she was loading the dishwasher. She was choking, could not cry out for help, and only Horace was in the house, a room away in a wheelchair. Before she disengaged herself, she said, what flashed through her mind was a headline: LYRIC POET DIES CHAINED TO DISHWASHER! "How that would have comforted my enemies," she laughed.

She was not a dreamer. She made frequent allusions to her appearance. As a girl and younger woman she had been a great beauty. Now she was stocky, balding, and illness had swollen one arm to twice the size of the other. In public appearances she sometimes draped a scarf over the smaller, normal-size arm. She saw too the great danger in the literary world, that it could become a sort of dream world: "Only a piercing vision of reality can save and inspire us, too." As an example of the dangers of too much dreaming, she cited "poor old Jean Starr Untermeyer," who, having just published a book of poems, was said to have instructed her editor not to bother to send it to the Pulitzer or National Book Award committees, because they were jealous. "Just send it to the Nobel Committee. *They* will understand!"

In contrast to the Jean Starr Untermeyers of this world, the Gregorys cited Robinson Jeffers and Samuel Beckett as two "beacon

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lights" for them, as writers and as human beings. Both chose privacy rather than give up what they saw as the truth, avoiding the marketplace until it came to them. "We have our one great luxury," Marya would proclaim, "and that is our passionate desire to fight for our beliefs and integrity. Horace's taste has been praised and his sense of prophecy is well known." She could be arrogant, but never self-pitying.

It was a guilty pleasure to hear her review her contemporaries. Louise Bogan's poems were "feeble and an ugly spirit flows through them like dirty water." Kenneth Rexroth had "the mind of a secondhand-bookshop dealer"—a mélange of titles from books he had never read. James T. Farrell was "too egotistical to be dotty and too much of an Irish peasant to be unshrewd." "Our friendship with Jim," she said, "is an odd one; it's based on the fact that we have absolutely *nothing* in common." She detested the works of feminist poets, saying that women in America had too much freedom already. "The women poets make me sick. I was never anything but a woman poet, anyway. I've never had male tendencies, and never felt like one."

She also disliked the poetry and person of Delmore Schwartz: "I have too much respect for the English language to like his pidgin Yiddish." As for Auden, she found him wise, shrewd, and a real poet—but essentially so English that he would be better off returning to England (which eventually he did). At his Coffee House going-away party (where Marya was seated at his left), Auden told her he was deserting a sinking ship. The tide had turned to "the Gary Snyders and the Robert Creeleys." She always was quick to defend Auden, calling him that rare thing, "a gentleman." She also championed the English poet Ruth Pitter. "Name a better!" she'd roar. Marya owned a tray hand-painted by Pitter, who supported herself through such craft.

If the foregoing sounds as if we mainly talked gossip, let me assure you we largely talked books. Among the writers the Gregorys introduced me to were the Irish co-novelists Somerville and Ross; Vernon Lee; and John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester. Horace read the latter aloud and with great amusement. When I expressed admiration for Erica Jong's first two books of bawdy verse, Horace accepted Jong's as a kind of erotic light verse, the greatest merit of which was its shock appeal—which vanished on rereading. Her subsequent collections proved him correct.

We discussed C. P. Cavafy at length. Horace, for some temperamental reason, preferred Cavafy to Rilke, just as he preferred Joyce's *Chamber Music* to Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*. About Cavafy, Horace was eloquent. He felt the Greek transcended his homosexuality by his deeply rooted sense of human destiny and by his wit, which compensated for certain religious ambiguities, his shuffling back and forth between pagan and Christian altars. Horace felt Cavafy less middle-class, less middlebrow, than Auden, even in his homosexuality, and therefore less sentimental.

Horace was more at home than Marya in discussing the moderns. She preferred Donne, Campion, Herbert, Landor, Swinburne, and the Rossettis. She possessed an especial weakness for the poetry of Matthew Arnold. She also loved to read biographies, particularly of poets and titled personages. I gave her a copy of the life of the seventeenth-century poet and playwright Aphra Behn, which she kept prominently on display. When guests saw the book and asked, "Do you read Aphra Behn?" she would snap, "*Read* her? Certainly not! It's her life I admire, not her work." She went on to say that one of the advantages of being a forerunner is that one doesn't have to be very good.

I managed to give her another book by a writer she also disliked. (Giving the Gregorys a book was very chancy; everything they liked, they'd read, and they were suspicious of what they hadn't read.) When I saw her reaction to this second book, I offered to exchange it for something else. "Oh no —I'm glad to have books by writers I don't

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like. That way I can *prove* why I don't like them."

Even in her dreams, Marya's taste was for the historical. She told us once of dreaming of Sir Philip Sidney meeting Alice Meynell —a rather specialized dream, we thought. Of the recent American poetry I brought her, she didn't like much: "I feel like a nun at a rock-and-roll festival," she quipped. To which Horace replied, "But Marya, a modern nun would love it and join the show!"

Both Gregorys defended H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and Sir John Betjeman, Elizabeth Bowen and Jean Rhys. Both had met Rhys at the Brevoort in the 1930s. Aside from discussing books, one delight in visiting the Gregorys was hearing of their literary encounters. They never "dropped names." Simply through conversation, one learned that they had both met H.D. in 1934, introduced by the British novelist Bryher (Winnifred Ellerman, who later introduced them to Dr. John Prutting as well). Horace had met both Eliot and Yeats; the latter claimed the ghost of Horace's grandfather had commanded him to meet him! Both Gregorys met Osbert and Edith Sitwell when the celebrated pair visited the States in 1948. They were photographed with them in a now-famous portrait taken at a party at the Gotham Book Mart. Others in the picture are Stephen Spender, Auden, William Rose Benét, Charles Henri Ford, Schwartz, Jarrell, Marianne Moore, Bishop, Tennessee Williams, José Garcia Villa, Richard Eberhart, and Gore Vidal.

The couple claimed to be searching for new writers to praise, but found few to meet their standards. They had met Antonia White in their travels, and approved of her novels, especially *Frost in May*. Among books by young poets I introduced them to they especially enjoyed those by Seamus Heaney, whose poems they found had character and were consistently interesting. His flaw, Horace thought, was that he chattered too much about skull and bone—an overdone aspect of his imagery. They also admired Geoffrey Hill and the poetry of the Orkneys writer George Mackay Brown. I was unsuccessful in interesting them in Barbara Pym, whom they thought honest but not very bright. They found her muse to be a middlebrow goddess looking rather like Miss Pym's jacket photo, in which she wears a four-in-hand tie around a rather thick neck. They did admire the stories of my close friend Elizabeth Spencer, citing her sense of high comedy and her ability to portray lonely women.

Whenever I brought them a new book, it was often the case that they had not heard of it. They had stopped reading *The New York Times Book Review* some years before, and refused to subscribe to *The New York Review of Books*. They preferred instead the London *Times Literary Supplement*, *The Spectator*, and the book pages of *The Scotsman* and *The Economist*. Their opinions in every case were formulated without exposure to current literary hype. They were unanimous in loathing television.

After high tea or supper, we would have coffee and Marya cigarettes, until a rap was heard on the back door. It was one of the high-school boys hired to put Horace to bed. They needed a good male nurse, but had to settle for boys. Horace would say good night and be wheeled off. Marya then would relax and settle down to the table with another cigarette. This seemed, for her, the high point of the evening—a time when she could talk uninterrupted or uncorrected by Horace. And talk she did! Though I scarcely appreciated it then, one value of their conversation was not its learning but its candor. It was much as Horace in his autobiography described undergraduate conversations with his mentor, the classicist William Ellery Leonard, "a violent blaze and shedding of light."

After Horace was abed, Marya's conversation would get more personal. She would say how exhausted she was, but that even if she could stop waiting on him "hand and foot," she wouldn't. She considered it "an honor." He was cheerful and kind and thoughtful and a better human being than she, she said—and a better poet, too. She felt that

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whatever was good and fine in herself was due to his example. She was sincere in all this. They were very proud of one another. She felt neither of them had lived the lives they deserved. In the early 1970s she had dreams of a trip back to Ireland for both of them, but that never materialized. An earlier trip, in the summer of 1934, had been a gift from Bryher. Marya also dreamed of more help and therapy for Horace—someone to take him out of doors in good weather, to take him places in a car. She admitted they both spent too much time in that house. But money was tight. When Horace retired from Sarah Lawrence, he was presented with a typewriter and an eighty-five-dollar-a-month pension. The pension, along with Social Security and book royalties, was his only source of income. Moreover, the royalties were not what they should be. The Gregorys had no agent, and had signed some disadvantageous contracts. He had taken a flat fee for his Ovid translation, for instance, and for years got not a penny more —though it ran into over twenty printings and was used in classrooms worldwide.

Despite difficulties, they managed. They were resourceful. To send their son, Patrick, to a good prep school, they had moved out of their house to collect rent. They lived in smaller quarters, and when the boy got a scholarship to college, they moved back to Palisades, according to Marya.

For all her bravura, Marya could be touchingly vulnerable. Once we brought our young son, Graham, to supper. He was very well behaved, but a vase of plastic flowers fascinated him. "Plastic flowers!" he said with amusement. Marya became defensive. She lectured the eight-year-old how artificial flowers were used with effect by "the fanciest decorators." Of course, she explained, hers were only from Woolworth's, plastic and not silk. But since she couldn't afford fresh flowers every day, and since she couldn't bear to see wilting flowers, and . . . On and on she explained to this child. Obviously she was hurt by his comment.

A far greater hurt was inflicted when, in 1975, her last publisher rejected *A Gallery of Poets*, her prose study of favorite poets. It was a manuscript on which she had worked for many years. The publisher claimed not to know how to market such a book. She was so discouraged that when the manuscript came back she hid it somewhere in the house and forgot where. When another publisher expressed interest in seeing it, she never responded. She had lapsed into a sort of paralysis of the will, "a kind of suicide," she called it. Only Horace's good spirits kept her natural melancholy in check. About this time one of the literary quarterlies asked her to write a piece on the Pre-Raphaelites—something she was abundantly qualified to do. She found she could not fight the dreadful urge to silence. To my knowledge, the *Gallery* manuscript was never found.

These evenings were not all spent alone with the Gregorys. Sometimes we would find other guests, usually delightful. In earlier years they entertained Dudley Fitts, Morton Zabel, and Norman Holmes Pearson. We met there Joseph Campbell, the myth critic, and Dr. and Mrs. Theodore Shedlovsky, he of the Rockefeller University faculty. Mrs. Shedlovsky was a lovely aging blonde. At one point in the evening, Marya said of another, "Oh, she's one of those blondes! You know how early they fade!" Mrs. Shedlovsky smiled weakly at Marya and gave me a wink of amusement. Virgil Thomson spent an entire evening talking about Mary Butts with the Gregorys. They admired her—not as a good novelist but as a great literary curiosity. It was at their house also that I met Arthur Gregor, the Viennese-born poet whom they claimed to have discovered and were the first to anthologize. And of course we saw James T. Farrell and Cleo Paturis. Farrell was particularly chagrined when Saul Bellow—a younger Chicago novelist—won the Nobel Prize in 1976. "Well," he sighed, "Saul has enough admirers without me."

In these late years in their careers, the Gregorys enjoyed a share of glory. Marya published her final collection, *The Hidden Waterfall*, which was dedicated to us and to Horace, in 1974; Horace published his auto-

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biography in 1971, his collected essays in 1973, and his final poetry volume in 1976. The books received respectful reviews. In 1977 the Gregorys were given honorary doctorate degrees from the Univeristy of Wisconsin. It was out of the question for Horace to make the trip, but Marya declared she was going: "There aren't enough honors in this world, and I'm going to get mine!" In the June heat she marched in cap and gown, receiving a standing ovation. Afterward she dined with the governor. In 1979 both she and Horace received Ingram Merrill Awards of six thousand dollars each. Marya received the Jacob Gladstein Award from *Poetry* magazine, and Horace received the Mark Rothko Award.

Naturally, I would have liked these visits to go on year after year. But it was not to be. There were premonitions. One winter night in 1979 their furnace went out, and Marya's calls to the fuel company went unanswered. She feared for Horace, near-immobile in his wheelchair in a freezing house. With the self-possession that so often was hers, she called the police, who promptly saw to it that the furnace was attended to. She told me that when the furnace went out, she felt like one of Napoleon's poor soldiers lured into an invasion in the dead of Russian winter—then left to freeze to death. It was a horror story from her childhood.

That same year a fire broke out in their house. Though the couple escaped danger with the help of their neighbors, it was a warning. Other things began to get out of control: the roof began to leak, the ancient plumbing broke down, their antique furniture began to fall apart. A rare-book dealer from Manhattan allegedly took volume after volume from their library, behind their backs, after being told he could take only a few. He paid them just a few hundred dollars for everything he took. Among the missing volumes was Marya's address book, containing all the phone numbers and addresses of their friends and acquaintances, including, of course, some "celebrities."

More undermining than cold or fire or theft was lack of help, especially to get Horace to and from bed. Some of the boys failed to show up in the evening if there was a local basketball game. Sometimes he sat for hours waiting to be put to bed. They hired next an older man. He would show up, but sometimes under the influence of drugs. One Halloween one of the local athletes who had come to tend to Horace had his little joke with Marya. When she awoke in the morning, there was a dead rat in a mousetrap by her bed. It made her sick. Yet she didn't complain. She lived in terror that the boys would not show up at all.

After a time they tried switching to girls, but even that didn't work. One night Marya's winter coat vanished from the closet, never again to be seen. Silverware disappeared. Once Horace invited me to pour the four of us a drink of Irish whiskey. I opened the usually well-stocked liquor cabinet to find it empty. Horace peered inside, then said quietly to Marya, "You see? I told you they were robbing us blind."

This is not an indictment of all their hired help. Over the years they had some dedicated friends who served well, including taking Marya to and from New York City. But with Leona's retirement, things in Palisades took a different cast. (Leona planned to move down South and take it easy. Instead, she died shortly after leaving the Gregorys. Who would have thought that they would outlive her?)

Marya's health got worse. Her circulation was poor, and she began to have trouble walking. She went from room to room holding onto the furniture. She no longer even walked the several blocks to the post office. Mail piled up. Their children had long ago moved away—Patrick to New England, Joanna to Scotland. And old friends were dying off—E. E. Cummings, Leona, Dr. Shedlovsky, Leslie Cross, Norman Holmes Pearson, Dudley Fitts . . . Marya suddenly became easily confused. Her chronology was off. She was not unlike Horace's description of the older Violet Hunt, who in 1934 insisted that Henry James was coming to visit her! Years after Muriel Rukeyser's

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death, Marya would ask me, "I heard Rukeyser died. Is it really true?" Horace began to see the wisdom of moving closer to their son, Patrick.

I suppose Horace originally had a small house or apartment in mind. But a nursing home is what they finally moved into, in the town of Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts. Probably their children thought this the best solution to their many practical and medical problems.

We were present at the Gregorys "good-bye party" in Palisades in June 1980. They had lived in the village since 1944, and their friends and neighbors honored their leave-taking at the Palisades Library. Horace's feet were oddly tied together with a piece of frayed rope—to keep them from slipping off the wheelchair? He maintained his dignity. Marya seemed distracted. Speeches were made, all about Horace and his achievements. A gift was produced—a signed first edition of Yeats—and presented to Horace. I thought this extremely thoughtless of the villagers; it was as if Marya had accomplished nothing. When someone showed the Yeats volume to Marya, she said firmly, "Show it to Horace. It was given to *him*."

We never got to visit the Gregorys again, though we had many invitations. Horace wrote, "We are perched on a hillside within a deep and beautiful pine grove, all very pretty, clean and neat, a cross between living at Yaddo, a canyon near Los Angeles in Pacific Palisades where we spent the summer in 1955, and a smartly run hospital—this place has the imprisonment of all three, an American 1980s version of *The Magic Mountain*, with local news (not philosophy) on brightly colored TV—perfect for children from 2 to 6."

Horace adjusted to the change. Patrick accepted the challenge of bringing him more and more books. Horace read enormously and remained cheerful. But the move to a new climate and new people was traumatic for Marya. Living in a nursing home after so many years of owning one's home is a trial at best. The loss of liberty must be deeply felt, in addition to the losses of privacy and identity. She wrote us, "One pays a more than heavy price for physical handicaps. The flesh is weak though the spirit is stronger than expected." Thereafter she always signed her letters, "Wistfully, Marya." She many times expressed her wish to leave, but recognized the impossibility.

Marya became very ill in November 1981. It was diagnosed as Alzheimer's disease —ironic for one so rooted in history. She couldn't read and wouldn't eat. She died in January 1982. When Horace called to tell me of her death, he said it would be difficult to continue without her; they had been married fifty-seven years. To take his mind off his loss, I suggested several projects he could consider undertaking. One was a new collected poems, another a collected translations. But the day after Marya's funeral, he took to his bed. Horace died just two months after Marya. One of the last things he said to his son and his daughter, with deep expression, was, "I'm so happy, I'm so happy."

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François Truffaut: saved by the cinema

by John Simon

There are good, questionable, and bad reasons for wishing to read someone's collected letters. The sound reason is simply wanting to know that remarkable person better; to become, at least vicariously, a confidant and friend. The more dubious reason is wanting to impress people who haven't read the book with juicy anecdotes—human, all too human. The unsound reason is trying to derive some previously secret formula for success and fame. No one became lastingly famous for aping someone else: originality is the minimum requirement.

Readers embarking on *François Truffaut: Correspondence 1945-1984* will be foiled utterly in their baser expectations. [1] Not only is there no formula for success, there isn't even much gossip. For the latter, the reason is twofold. Truffaut, who—like many, if not most, film directors—is known to have conducted love affairs with some of his stunning leading ladies, stipulated that none of his love letters be published for quite some years to come; and Truffaut's family (for which read ex-wife) saw to it that the present editors, Gilles Jacob and Claude de Givray, omit passages or letters that might be considered embarrassing. After referring to the many Truffaut letters that were lost or thrown away (André Bazin, the critic who was Truffaut's mentor and a sort of adoptive father, never kept any letters), they mention that some "letters were, rightly or wrongly, judged too intimate for publication."

It is easy to overhear the plaintiveness in that "rightly or wrongly," which refers, of course, also to the many omissions indicated by ellipses. Yet one can often infer from the very placement of the lacunae that the stuff cut could not have been all that terrible, and that it is only the vanity of the ex-wife, Madeleine Morgenstern, that is at stake. Still, there is enough left in these 500-odd pages (573 if you count the footnotes and pictures) to give a fair idea of what Truffaut was like. And what he was like—be prepared for something rare in a film director—is *nice*.

But, of course, not nice the way people about whom one can say nothing much else are deemed nice by default. No. Truffaut was extremely talented, intelligent, quick-witted, generally outspoken, hard-working, enthusiastic, woman-crazy, generous, fierce when angered, and, on top of that, nice. Yet this man started out as something close to a juvenile delinquent, army deserter, manic-depressive. He was quite literally saved by his love of books and film, as he himself was first to admit. And that love of books, by the way, was the second unusual thing about this filmmaker. The third, though in France after World War II this was not so rare, was that he began as a film critic. However, in my

1 *François Truffaut: Correspondence 1945-1984*, edited by Gilles Jacob and Claude de Givray, with a foreword by Jean-Luc Godard; translated from the French by Gilbert Adair; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 590 pages, $50; $19.95 paper.

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view, the letters are more persuasive and better written than the criticism.

The letters, I repeat, tell a good deal, and much is neatly filled in by the editors' preface, notes, and chronological table. About all matters French they are perfectly informed and informative; about foreigners, in good French fashion, somewhat less so. Thus the actress Nora Gregor was Austrian, not German; *fumetti* are not dialogue balloons, but a kind of photographed Italian comic strip; Tom Jones is not a producer of Broadway musicals, but their librettist; Charles T. Samuels was a scholar and critic rather than a journalist. But these are trifles.

François Truffaut was born in 1932, the son of an architect and a secretary at *L'Illustration*. The parents farmed the boy out successively to his grandmothers (one in Paris, the other in the suburbs), until, on the death of the second, the eight-year-old boy came home again. Shunted from school to school, he was a miserable student, excelling only at French. Sitting at the back of the classroom, he'd often do crossword puzzles. Whenever possible, he and his friend Robert Lachenay would play hooky: they'd read books or hang out at the movies. They even stole a typewriter from Truffaut senior's office and hocked it for movie money. François founded a cinéclub that lasted one performance. Most of this became the stuff of *The 400 Blows* (1959), Truffaut's first feature and international success. At one of the film societies, Truffaut met Bazin; a little later, his articles started hitting the public prints.

At age eighteen, having ended an unhappy love affair and clandestinely sold all of Lachenay's books for rent money, Truffaut recklessly enlisted in the army, expecting to be shipped to Indochina. Lachenay took the skullduggery well, and the army shipped Truffaut to Germany. Not enjoying any of it, except target practice, he was soon going AWOL and doing time in army prisons and hospitals. At the intercession of Bazin and others, he was finally discharged for a "personality disorder."

In 1953, he worked briefly for the Ministry of Agriculture, then joined Bazin at the soon-to-become-renowned *Cahiers du Cinéma*; there and in *Arts*, he published articles and reviews that aroused attention; he also made his first short film. In 1956, he got a job as an assistant to Roberto Rossellini; the Italian director took the paternal place of Bazin during Truffaut's transition from film journalist to filmmaker. Since childhood, Truffaut had been jotting down the title of every film he saw, also the name of the director, especially if the movie was attacked: "I was always for the artist, the misunderstood artist who provokes sneers." Soon he had three hundred files in alphabetical order, from Marc Allégret to Fred Zinnemann.

He met and, later, married "the very sweet Madeleine Morgenstern," the daughter of a powerful film producer whose products the young critic used to revile. Enabled to form his own film company, named Les Films du Carrosse after Jean Renoir's *The Golden Coach*, one of his adored films, Truffaut started with a charming short, *Les Mistons (The Mischief-Makers)* in 1957; the following year, he began filming *The 400 Blows*, which would make him someone to reckon with. It was also the beginning—one of the beginnings—of *la nouvelle vague*, the "new wave" in filmmaking.

Whose brainchild was the New Wave? The question has been endlessly debated. Truffaut, Chabrol, and Resnais are usually cited; also Godard, though *Breathless* came later. Claims have been made, too, for Jacques Rivette, less plausibly for Alexandre Astruc, and implausibly for Roger Vadim (*And God Created Woman*, 1959). Oddly enough, these last three claims can be found in the writings of Truffaut. He could, however, have mentioned another film (which he liked), *The Lovers*, by Louis Malle, who also was in there pitching.

The fairest way of putting it is that the New Wave was the creation—largely, but not exclusively—of the *Cahiers du Cinéma*. It was the Young Turks of that publication who, first in print and then on screen, advocated and implemented a kind of movie-

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making whose salient characteristics are a highly personal approach, irreverence in subject and treatment, equal love for the lowly and the exalted (actually, a preference for the former, if by "lowly" we understand all that is excluded by Official Art), reveling in the technical possibilities of film, and immersion in the process of filmmaking not as in mere work, but as in a sort of sacred river: mystic ritual, religious ecstasy, orgiastic revelry—all of those.

Something essential about Truffaut became visible in *The 400 Blows* (a misnomer in English: *faire les quatre cents coups* means raising hell): a sense of play, serious as well as comic—even, so to speak, sad play. He was already applying that guiding principle that he claimed to have discovered in the films of Joshua Logan, who "wills us to laugh during a sad scene and, conversely, to feel saddened during a funny one." In a letter to Maurice Pons, on whose story *Les Mistons* was based, he writes that "it is impossible to create something—a film, a novel, etc.— that does not *absolutely* resemble oneself." So he explains to Pons that the film will "not correspond to your style but even [contradict] it."

Duality, then, is the principle: humor in sadness, melancholy in joy, Truffaut in Pons. In that same autumn of 1957, Truffaut execrates in a letter André Cayatte, who, like René Clément earlier, represented the well-made film, "that rancid hotch-potch with its seasoning of bluff and naïvety." Truffaut was already recommending Barthes's *Mythologies*, a book full of circuitousness and indirection: "polemical" and "negative" article writers could "learn a great deal" from it. But, at the same time, he likes simplicity. He writes Marcel Moussy, his collaborator on the screenplays of *The 400 Blows* and his next, *Shoot the Piano Player* (1960), about a Sunday he spent among men of letters: "They were shifty, scheming, two-faced, flamboyant and boring beyond belief; the atmosphere was much more evil than the world of the cinema where there's less pretense." And already he is dispensing good, simple advice to a young screenwriter: "I sincerely believe that you should completely revise and restructure your script in such a way as to favor a single character with whom we would identify from the beginning to the end of the film, the others appearing only in the background."

But did Truffaut heed his own counsel? In *The 400 Blows*, the gentler René is just as much needed and appreciated as the more bristling Truffaut alter ego, Antoine Doinel. In *Shoot the Piano Player*, the character played by Charles Aznavour is the indubitable protagonist, but is there one in the next film, *Jules et Jim* (1961)? Here, surely, the two men are of equal importance, and Catherine, the woman they share, may be more important yet. But perhaps for Truffaut—and this may be crucial— appearing in the background was, though more fleeting, as vivid as appearing in the foreground.

Nothing about a film is unimportant to Truffaut, least of all the secondary characters. As he puts it in a letter to an American correspondent, "The revolt, to use a very grand word, of *Cahiers du Cinéma* was more moral than aesthetic. What we were arguing for was an *equality* of observation on the part of the artist vis-à-vis his characters instead of a distribution of sympathy and antipathy, which in most cases betrayed the servility of artists with regard to the stars of their films and, on the other hand, their demagoguery with regard to the public."

Of course, there were exceptions among the older filmmakers, too, and the love for them emerges clearly from these letters. I would say that Truffaut's first three films —probably his best—are all in the sign of a favorite filmmaker: *The 400 Blows*, of Jean Vigo; *Shoot the Piano Player*, of Alfred Hitchcock; *Jules et Jim*, of Jean Renoir. But it must be remembered that books mattered to Truffaut about as much as movies. "I love [books] and films equally," he told Charles T. Samuels, "but how I love them!" "If I knew how to write," he observes in a letter of 1968, "I wouldn't be playing the fool behind my big Mitchell 300," the somewhat unwieldy camera Truffaut was then using. And in a letter of 1978, he speaks of his "occasionally excessive respect for books."

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This love of books, a key aspect of Truffaut's filmmaking, is a childhood phenomenon that kept pace with him wherever he went. Thus he replies to Lachenay's inquiry about a good Balzac biography from Koblenz, in the midst of his struggle to get out of the army:

> What a question, for me it's always been all or nothing, especially where Balzac is concerned.
>
> The 2 volumes of the *Vie de Balzac* by André Billy published by Albin Michel (I think) are interesting but insufficient; René Benjamin's *Balzac* is excellent but also, for other reasons, insufficient (in the Nelson collection . . .); Claude Mauriac's *Aimer Balzac* is absolutely useless.
>
> But there must exist something better for the Balzac 'specialist': Marcel Bouteron, Pierre Descaves, etc. In my opinion, my humble opinion, one should *first* have bought and *read* all of Balzac including the plays, etc. and one should even, before the biographies, have Balzac's *Correspondence* (at least 4 or 5 volumes), the letters to Zulma, Carraud, etc.

Amazing, this, from a nineteen-year-old army deserter who was also a fifteen-year-old school dropout. But equally amazing is the list of authors this autodidact cherished, as it emerges from these letters—to cite only the French authors, in no particular order: Raymond Queneau, Simenon (whom he considered superior to Camus), Bernanos, Drieu la Rochelle, Pierre Klossowski, Genet, Paul Léautaud, and especially Jacques Audiberti—a roster at once eclectic, esoteric, and exquisite. But, as he also writes Lachenay in another letter, "I would sometimes like to be forced to read stupid books, thrillers, adventure stories, etc. I'm not joking, it can really be very instructive." He does, however, discriminate; in 1951, he writes Lachenay, "See if there's Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu* (16 volumes). It's a wonderful book and crucial to the future of the novel: Balzac and Proust are the 2 greatest novelists in the French language." And, in a slightly later letter, "You must be blinded by love if you're reading Paul Géraldy. All things considered, I prefer Prévert even though I like him less and less."

How different this true love of books is from Jean-Luc Godard's phony one. Godard, as Truffaut himself tells us, would pick up books off his host's bookshelf at a party, leaf through them, jot down some prestigious-sounding passage, and quote it in his next film, usually in the form of an irrelevant title card exhibitionistically dragged in. But, then, how different are the movies of those two. What major film director, Bergman not excluded, would have gone as far as Truffaut in this 1970 remark to Samuels: "Making *Fahrenheit* is what taught me that dialogue was more important in a film than I had realized. It is, in fact, the most important thing."

But no filmmaker, least of all the always ambivalent Truffaut, can leave it at that. So we find Truffaut writing (in 1966, the year he made *Fahrenheit 451*), in the introduction to *Le Cinéma selon Hitchcock*, "The most fundamental question of all [is] how to express oneself by purely visual means . . . . Whatever is *said* instead of being *shown* is lost upon the viewer." Still, Truffaut kept refining his sense of how to use words on film. In a 1977 letter to Jean Mambrino, a Jesuit and a screenwriter, he explains: "Three abstract nouns in a sentence (if it's heard instead of read) impede the spectator's train of thought, which is why one has to use short sentences." Similarly, Truffaut kept deepening his comprehension of the visual aspect of cinema. In a 1973 piece on Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* (reprinted in a collection of essays and reviews, *The Films in My Life*), Truffaut proffers his highest praise: "There is nothing on the canvas except what Bergman (who's anti-pictorial, like all true filmmakers) wants there." "Anti-pictorial" seems to mean selectively, controlledly visual, just as the advice to Mambrino means being selectively, judiciously verbal.

In his rather short life (1932-1984), cut off by a brain tumor, Truffaut produced, as the editors of this book remind us, "21 feature

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films, 3 shorts, 10 books, 10 unrealized projects, 13 prefaces and literally hundreds of articles." That is considerable, and sometimes gave even Truffaut pause. "I've made too many films in the last 5 years," he writes in 1978, "too many and too quickly." Yet in 1961, he wrote Charles Aznavour, "As you know, I work slowly and never rush things." The tempo never really changed; it was one film every one or two years, except for two films in 1969: the unsuccessful *Mississippi Mermaid* and the rather successful *The Wild Child*. But as he was involved in so many more and various activities with every passing year, the pace, if not the output, kept growing more dizzying.

Mermaid and child, those were Truffaut's chief topics—those and Truffaut himself. He liked to put himself into his movies, either by proxy (Jean-Pierre Léaud was the youthful surrogate of choice; Charles Denner, the middle-aged one) or literally, as in *The Wild Child*, *Day for Night* (*La Nuit américaine* [1973]), and *The Green Room* (1978). The subject was almost always childhood (*The 400 Blows*, *The Wild Child*, *Small Change*, i.e., *L'Argent de poche* [1976]) or grand passions of one kind or another involving fanatically devoted or dangerously destructive women, the two types sometimes overlapping.

In these letters, Truffaut does not have much to say about childhood, but the earlier missives, mostly to Lachenay, are wonderful demonstrations of the functioning of a gifted, artistically inclined adolescent and youth in the France of the Forties and early Fifties. It is interesting, in this context, to note the black moods to which the usually ebullient François could fall prey. Thus the eighteen-year-old writes, "There was a very real chance of my being in no condition to answer your letter, as I tried to kill myself and had 25 razor slashes in my right arm"—this following a wild party given by Truffaut's then girl friend upon failing her baccalaureate exam. In front of such current and future celebrities as Claude Mauriac, Alexandre Astruc, and Maurice Schérer (a.k.a. Eric Rohmer), she dumped on him; typically, he compared the whole thing to Renoir's *The Rules of the Game*, with himself as its hero, Jurien. After he wounded himself, and the girl cold-bloodedly bandaged his arm, he became Frédéric Lemaître in *The Children of Paradise*.

Films and life became entangled and undistinguishable for him: "I fall in love with people through films," he writes in 1965. To the best of my ability to decipher that remark, it means that he fell in love with the female characters he created, then consummated the love by having affairs with the actresses who portrayed those parts. And what ravishing actresses they were: Jeanne Moreau, Françoise Dorléac, her sister, Catherine Deneuve, Isabelle Adjani, Nicole Berger, Julie Christie, Jacqueline Bisset, Alexandra Stewart, Marie-France Pisier, Sabine Haudepin, Delphine Seyrig, Claude Jade, Leslie Caron—to mention only the most striking ones. Some of these actresses—like Fanny Ardant, with whom he lived during his last couple of years, and by whom he had his third daughter—certainly, a few others probably, were his lovers. Indeed, it is fairly clear even from this heavily censored book that what broke up Truffaut's marriage was the closeness to Jeanne Moreau. One or two of these actresses also seem to have hurt Truffaut when, upon finishing shooting, they were gone like a shot. But Truffaut never stopped looking for the perfect relationship. Among the other women with whom he was involved, and who are veiledly mentioned in the letters, we recognize Soraya, the second wife of the Shah of Iran.

Yet he was not a philanderer, a *coureur*. About to shoot *Jules et Jim* in 1960, he describes the film as "a demonstration through joy and grief of the impossibility of any sexual combination outside of the couple." Even in the film that is most outspoken about his womanizing, *The Man Who Loved Women* (1977), the hero, Bertrand Morane, played by the Truffaut alter ego Charles Denner, is not a mere soulless lecher. Reviewing J. P. Mocky's *Les Vierges* in 1965, Truffaut wrote, "This is a man's film, a film about

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girls as seen by a man who is both obsessed sexually and a puritan, two hardly incompatible conditions." That fits both Morane and Truffaut, neither of which puritans could be without women for long. As one female character explains his conquests to Morane, "You have a special way of asking. It's as if your life depended on it." The love letters of Truffaut, with their special way of asking, will make fascinating reading when and if they're published.

Meanwhile, we do get some glimpses in this correspondence. Not yet twenty, François writes his pal Robert from the army in Germany, "What is it you find fault with in my love life? I may lack Balzac's genius, but my love life is just as complicated as his, the objects of my affection being either sixteen or forty years old, with a few ambiguous relationships between these 2 ages; young women of good stock and widows; there's nothing else that matters and how heavenly to correspond with them, I could show you a collection of letters like no other!" I dare say, and what a shame that we have to make do with such teasers. In 1979, the forty-six-year-old Truffaut writes to the young director Jacques Doillon: "Worst of all is the rereading of love letters. That's when one notices how one spends one's life setting oneself up to be hurt rather than doing the best for oneself." So there's the commentary, but where's the text?

Two related phenomena strike me as rather less attractive. One is Truffaut's making dates with the very young or newborn daughters of his friends. To Bob Balaban, he writes in 1978: "Tell [your little girl] to write my name on the first page of her dance card." The editors note that he sent telegrams to Samuel Fuller's daughter the day she was born ("Dear Samantha, already I love you") and on her first birthday ("Dear Samantha, your suitor is waiting to take you to dinner when you are old enough"). In February 1983, the fifty-one-year-old Truffaut writes a letter to the just-born granddaughter of one of his first film editors: "Since I can already foresee the queues forming, I'm asking you without further delay to reserve for me the 1st Wednesday of March 1996. I'll take you to see a film forbidden to under-13s, and then we'll go to have an ice-cream at Angélina's." I am sure some people—including, probably, the families of these little girls—found this sort of thing charming; it strikes me as mildly creepy.

Creepier yet is Truffaut's relationship with Helen Scott, a woman who worked protractedly for the French Film Office in New York, but also held other film-related jobs in New York and Paris. She was also a translator (though not a very good one) who helped Truffaut write his interview book with Hitchcock: Scott translated Truffaut's questions into English and Hitchcock's answers into French. She was a sort of unofficial publicist for Truffaut, and doubtless a good friend. She was intelligent, but I found her tiresome, officious, and both fawning and overbearing. Large, obese, and horse-faced, she was one of the most repellent-looking women I've ever met. Yet Truffaut's letters to her are, at times, something very close to love letters.

What are we to make of this? If it is merely epistolary flirtatiousness, Gallic *courtoisie*, Truffaldian charm (Truffaut on Truffaut: "I may be a whore, but I'm the coquettish, crafty, subtle type who keeps his hat and shoes on"), it is a rather unattractive leading on of a no doubt susceptible woman—possibly also for personal gain, in exchange for slavish services. But if these things are the literal truth ("I send you a passionate kiss, since, between us, passion is compulsory," "I kiss your foot," "After having been closeted with me for 4 tender and violent weeks [while interviewing Hitchcock]," "My lovely, soft Scottie," etc.), I find it more than a little queasy-making.

Where, then, you may ask, is the "niceness" of Truffaut with which I began? There is a leitmotiv of sweetness, charm, decency, and good humor that runs through this book, very spiritedly, though not always grammatically, translated by Gilbert Adair. It comes out clearly in the nineteen-year-old's letter to Lachenay: "The humanist is the one

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who loves the individual and not society." It's in the young army jailbird who assesses Daudet's *Lettres de mon moulin*, which he has just reread, as "a mixture of glibness and sometimes vulgarity yet there's talent there." It comes out in the ability to laugh off often very severe bouts of depression: "I contemplate suicide with an extraordinary serenity—I will kill myself out of nonchalance, just letting myself go, the way I let myself go in the cinema with the great satisfaction of knowing that one could rouse oneself if 'one wished,' but that one might just as well not." There is a bit of ham and sham in this from the twenty-year-old, yet his woes at that time were real enough.

To Jean Mambrino, in 1955, he writes that he is unformed and uneducated, but has "the good fortune to be blessed with a slight sense of and great love for the cinema." After finishing *The 400 Blows*, he wants to give up, stay home, play with his daughter, read more and more, and take tap-dancing lessons to stop his fidgets. He doesn't mind typing with just one finger, because "that means I type harder and faster in accordance with the well-known law of compensation which . . . makes one-armed men better in bed." "If friends like [my films], it all seems worth while." In 1960, he explains why he won't write film criticism now that he is a filmmaker: "A number of old directors are unemployed because of the 'New Wave' and it would be tasteless for a lucky young devil . . ." (This is a recurrent theme.) He has compassion for stars: "Stars suffer because they're constantly being harassed; when they're no longer harassed, it's even worse." He recognizes that the only thing that saves *Jules et Jim* is its melancholy, which is its morality. He keeps turning down lucrative offers to film literary masterpieces from Proust to Kafka because he recognizes that film can only betray them.

His favorite contemporary painter is Balthus; he modestly perceives the book on Hitchcock as an opportunity to educate himself. He cries at Godard's *Vivre sa Vie*; goes back to see it with beloved Jeanne Moreau, and they "blub 3 or 4 times." He deplores the contempt for their actors, and indeed their fictional characters, that affects even his favorite directors—Hitchcock, Renoir, Hawks, Rossellini—when they reach fifty-five. He tells how, as a child, he always dreaded Christmas, because he hated his family—then softens this to "was bored by them." In 1964, he writes a lovely letter to Henri-Georges Clouzot, whom, along with other older directors, he attacked in his youthful reviews; gradually, he makes peace with several others, though never, I am sorry to say, with that "butcher" René Clément. He recognizes, as many directors don't, that "people are more important than celluloid." He loves Rossellini so much that he does his utmost to vindicate him, even when he sees the con man in him.

Honorably, he turns down an award for good citizenship (1967). Though he is not especially political (a refreshing thing in a Frenchman), he is co-leader in a quasi-political action to restore Henri Langlois to the Cinémathèque française, from which he has been fired by Malraux; later on, he is not afraid to distribute anti-Algerian War leaflets with Sartre and de Beauvoir. (Godard is.) He writes enthusiastic letters to directors whose films he likes, takes time to read and carefully criticize manuscripts sent by strangers, makes sensible rules for himself never to be on a film jury, never to reply to newspaper attacks, never to take legal action. "I don't have an 'auteur' complex," he writes in 1971, referring to the foolish "auteur theory" he helped spawn as a youth, and he does not minimize the importance of the screenwriter. He refuses to sign a manifesto that is "woolly, vague and insipid and bristling with too many capital letters." In 1973, he writes a most considerate letter to an actor whose big scene ended up on the cutting-room floor.

Truffaut is sensible about screen billing: "We all have equal billing in the cemetery." In 1978, he recognizes his chief problem, the need "to use every girl he meets as a means of settling accounts with his mother." In 1982, he threatens to resign from the Society of Film Directors if they don't stop bad-

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mouthing some of his colleagues. And, in the very last letter of this collection (to Annette Insdorf, January 16, 1984) he jokes about the brain tumor for which he has been operated on and which was to fell him nine months later: "Film criticism was *20 years ahead* of conventional medicine, since, when my 2nd film, *Tirez sur le Pianiste*, came out, it declared that such a film could only have been made by someone whose brain wasn't functioning normally!"

This is only an almost random sampling. But I must mention also what Truffaut called the *politique des copains* (not to be confused with the silly *politique des auteurs*, which arbitrarily exalted some directors and dismissed others), whereby Truffaut, like his colleagues on *Cahiers*, only perhaps more so, plugged in every conceivable way such filmmaker friends as Rohmer, Rivette, Godard, Chabrol, Resnais, Malle, and the rest. I find endearing his very French inability, or refusal, to learn a foreign language, in this case English, which would have been most advantageous to him. I recall having lunch with him once when, talking in French, he told me that it was a mistake to have done that book on Hitchcock; he should have done it on Oaks. We were sitting in the Oak Room of the Plaza, and it took me a moment to realize that he meant Howard Hawks. In a letter here, after reviewing the time, money, and effort he had spent on learning English, he comments, "There is in me a refusal to learn as powerful as my wish to know."

But the essence of the man emerges best, perhaps, from what may be considered the centerpiece of the book: the reprinted letter from Godard (May 1973) and Truffaut's answer. Having just seen *Day for Night*, Godard begins by calling his former friend (they had become estranged) what "no one else will . . . a liar." A liar because Ferrand, the film director in that movie—played by Truffaut himself and exhibiting many autobiographical traits—"is the only one who does not screw." This despite the press coverage of Truffaut and Jackie Bisset on the town together. The implication is that Truffaut was dishonest about a lot of things concerning filmmaking (and life); then, brazenly, Godard concludes by asking for a hefty sum to help subsidize *his* film, which will tell the truth. He concludes, "If you want to talk it over, fine."

There is, to be sure, truth in Godard's charge, but Truffaut's answer, which never really answers it, is nonetheless sublime. It begins: "So you won't be obliged to read this unpleasant letter right to the end, I'm starting with the essential point: I will not co-produce your film." What follows is a meticulously itemized list of Godard's human deficiencies and wrongdoings, as well as a statement on his artistic decline. I happen to agree with all Truffaut says—and the evidence he marshals is staggering—but more important than specifics is the human credo that emerges and from which I quote:

> The notion that all men are equal is theoretical with you . . . you have never succeeded in loving anyone or in helping anyone, other than by shoving a few banknotes at them . . . . Between your interest in the masses and your own narcissism there's no room for anything or anyone else . . . . Those who called you a genius, no matter what you did, all belonged to that famous trendy Left that runs the gamut from Susan Sontag to Bertolucci via Richard Roud . . . . I've always had the impression that real militants are like cleaning women, doing a thankless, daily but necessary job. But you, you're the Ursula Andress of militancy, you make a brief appearance, just enough time for the cameras to flash, you make two or three duly startling remarks and then you disappear again, trailing clouds of self-serving mystery.

And he, too, concludes with an offer to talk it over, and also—very Truffaut—an apt quotation from Bernanos. What is especially remarkable, though, is that, shortly afterward, in a letter to a journalist, Truffaut calls Godard's *Breathless* a masterpiece.

When it came to humanity—not excluding, needless to say, warts—Truffaut was hard to beat. Read, for example, the tribute of the great cinematographer Nestor Almendros, in his book *A Man With a Cam-*

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era, which begins by recalling the excellent, Renoir-like atmosphere of happy filmmaking that Truffaut created on the set, and stresses his willingness to take suggestions from everyone, down to the makeup people and grips. Although Truffaut writes that he is "not a good poetry reader," he will have to allow me to summarize his achievement with a verse and a half from Yves Bonnefoy's poem "Art de la poésie": "On a réconcilié la fièvre. On a dit au coeur/ D'être le coeur."

How will history evaluate Truffaut? A strong reaction against him has already set in, and most of his later films are, indeed, indefensible. It may be worth quoting a 1972 interview I conducted with Ingmar Bergman for my book on him:

Simon: What about the early Truffaut? Did you like those first ones?

Bergman: Very much. Very, very much.

S: What happened to this man?

B: He wants to make money; it's a very human desire. He wants a comfortable life . . . and he wants people to see his pictures.

S: Well, don't you think his early films were seen by people?

B: But perhaps not by enough, and he didn't make enough money, and he likes the comfortable life of the modern filmmaker.

S: But the trouble is his new films are not going to make much money. [This was before *Day for Night* and *The Last Metro* (1981).]

B: Then he made a mistake. Because if you lose both the money and your dignity, it must be a mistake.

It seems to me that *The 400 Blows*, the first half of *Jules et Jim*, and, above all, *Shoot the Piano Player* will survive comfortably. Not far behind will be *Stolen Kisses* (1968), *The Story of Adèle H.* (1975), and parts of some other films, with, I hope, genuine affection for that much underrated (even by Truffaut himself) charmer, *Such a Gorgeous Kid Like Me* (1972). Also for the shorts *Les Mistons* and *Antoine et Colette* (1962). That, I believe, is about as much as most major filmmakers can claim, and quite enough. The special quality of it is best expressed in Truffaut's 1980 letter to Jean-Claude Grumberg: "When humor can be made to alternate with melancholy, one has a success, but when the *same* things are funny and melancholic at the same time, it's just wonderful."

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Willa Cather's uncommon art

by Bruce Bawer

If one doesn't come across Willa Cather's name as frequently as those of the other major American novelists of her time, a large part of the reason, one suspects, is that she suffers from an image problem. People who have never even read her—or who retain only the vaguest memories of having read her in school—tend to think of her as earnest, proficient, dully respectable; almost universally, it seems, her name conjures up drab images of Midwestern prairies and amber waves of grain, images which are likely to strike the typical reader as far less scintillating than, say, Hemingway's soldiers and *toreros*, Fitzgerald's flappers and romantic egoists, or even Dreiser's magnificently wretched Jennies, Carries, and Clydes. Perhaps the most celebrated remark about Cather by one of her literary contemporaries is Hemingway's derisive comment, in a 1923 letter to Edmund Wilson, about a battlefront episode in her uncharacteristically flimsy novel *One of Ours*. "Do you know where it came from?" Hemingway asked. "The battle scene in *Birth of a Nation*. I identified episode after episode, Catherized. Poor woman she had to get her war experience somewhere." Later generations may not share Hemingway's overtly patronizing attitude toward Cather; but there does remain, in the minds of many, a perhaps unwitting inclination to dismiss her as a genteel and innocuous (if highly gifted) celebrant of frontier life.

This is unfortunate, for there are few American novelists whose collected works form as substantial, and as consistently masterful, a body of work as Willa Cather's. To read through her fiction—most of which has now been gathered in two Library of America volumes edited by Sharon O'Brien—is to recognize how slender, uneven, and replete with self-imitative works, by comparison, are the oeuvres of most of her contemporaries.[1] The contrast with Dreiser is particularly worth noting. The two novelists were almost exact contemporaries: Cather was born in 1873, two years after Dreiser's birth, and died in 1947, two years after his death. Like him, she was a Midwesterner (though born in Virginia, she moved to Nebraska as a child); like him, she grew up during the so-called Gilded Age, and was distressed by what she saw as a rise in crassness and vulgarity and a decrease in refinement, moral probity, and respect for grace and beauty. Yet she by no means shares what Lionel Trilling described as Dreiser's "showy nihilism"; on the contrary, her novels repeatedly underscore the significance of human life and purposeful effort. While Dreiser's prose, moreover, remained

1 *Willa Cather: Early Novels and Stories* (1,336 pages, $27.50) collects *The Troll Garden, O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark, My Antonia*, and *One of Ours*. *Willa Cather: Later Novels* (988 pages, $32.50) collects *A Lost Lady, The Professor's House, Death Comes for the Archbishop, Shadows on the Rock, Lucy Gayheart*, and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

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clumsy and bombastic throughout his career, as if to mirror his protagonists' raw energies, Cather's prose was from the first more classical than naturalistic, and over the years became increasingly spare, meticulous, and unembellished; clearly, she sought not to capture in her prose the roughness of frontier life, but rather to assert, by means of diction, tone, and syntax, traditional notions of civilization and culture.

The contrasts between the Old and New Worlds, and between civilization and wilderness, have been a favorite subject of American novelists since James Fenimore Cooper; but Cather had her own distinctive perspective on these themes. Growing up in close proximity to Swedes, Germans, and other immigrants, she observed the encounter between America and Europe at first hand, and perceived the high drama and heroism of these newcomers' struggle to adapt to the folkways of their new land while attempting to preserve the most valuable elements of life in the old country. Cather found heroes all over the American landscape: not only in those farmers whose persistence and perspicacity enabled them to subdue nature and prosper, but also in those who, tormented by the cultural limitations of frontier life, strove either to escape the frontier or to bring European-style enlightenment to it. As Alfred Kazin has observed, Cather's protagonists are all pioneers of a sort, living "by a purity of aspiration, an integrity or passion or skill" that can survive only through vision, willpower, and an unwavering indifference to the petty prejudices of others; they are, as a fellow character says of the heroine of *The Song of the Lark*, "uncommon" individuals "in a common, common world."

It was, indeed, the pioneer spirit, in whatever form, that her Nebraska upbringing taught Cather to recognize and admire; and it was in the extraordinary challenge posed by less than fully congenial environments to these unconventional spirits that she found her most enduring theme. Yet Cather distinguished true pioneers from equally assertive persons with meaner temperaments and less estimable goals. And she appreciated commoner souls as well: some of the most appealing characters in her books are unambitious, down-to-earth folks who are almost childishly simple and notable for their selfless devotion. Cather pays tribute, too—most conspicuously, in the stories about art and artists collected in her first book, *The Troll Garden* (1905)—to those who, through timidity, lack of vision, or untimely death, fail as pioneers. In "A Wagner Matinée," for instance, a young man's beloved aunt, a longtime Nebraska housewife, visits him in Boston, where she was once a music teacher. He thinks she has put her past behind her, but when she is emotionally overwhelmed by a Wagner concert he realizes that, somewhere deep within her soul, an artist has lived in torment. The aunt says she doesn't want to leave the concert hall, and he understands: "For her, just outside the door . . . lay the black pond with the cattle-tracked bluffs; the tall, unpainted house, with weather-curled boards; naked as a tower, the crook-backed ash seedlings where the dish-cloths hung to dry; the gaunt, moulting turkeys picking up refuse about the kitchen door." It is an affecting, well-written story, but the conclusion is pat and predictable, and hinges too strongly on the presumption that the reader shares the narrator's distaste for prairie life.

An even grimmer picture of prairie life is painted in "The Sculptor's Funeral," wherein the remains of a recently deceased young sculptor are returned to his Kansas hometown to be buried by his family and neighbors, virtually none of whom understood him and who even now patronizingly dismiss his accomplishments. The only characters who do not share this attitude are the local attorney and an art student who has escorted the body from Boston. The student, observing the townspeople's scorn, says that the sculptor "was wonderful . . . wonderful; but until to-night I have never known how wonderful." And the lawyer agrees: "That is the true and eternal wonder of it, anyway; that it can come even from

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such a dung heap as this." Though it may load the dice against the locals, the story's nightmarish vision of small-town ignorance, intolerance, and ignobility is horrifyingly plausible. The message—an important one in Cather—could hardly be clearer: an artist's family and hometown folks are not necessarily his "people" at all. (Cather makes much the same point in "Death in the Desert" and "The Marriage of Phaedra.")

The book's opening and closing stories focus on the relation between temperament and the attraction to art. "Flavia and Her Artists" is about a frivolous patroness who reveres artists yet insufficiently appreciates her husband, whom she finds deficient in aesthetic understanding; ultimately, however, he proves to have more integrity than any of her artists, and the ultimate illustration of this integrity is his quiet refusal to wear it on his sleeve. "Paul's Case," meanwhile, concerns a high-school boy whose enchantment with the world of art is unaccompanied by the qualities of temperament (the story is subtitled "A Study in Temperament") that might make possible for him a fulfilling life as an artist. Paul, a Carnegie Hall usher who hates the "ugliness and commonness" of his life, frequents the backstage area of a downtown theater where he "breathed like a prisoner set free, and felt within him the possibility of doing or saying splendid, brilliant, poetic things." He doesn't aspire to be an actor or a musician, but wants simply "to see, to be in the atmosphere, float on the wave of it, to be carried out, blue league after blue league, away from everything." The actors think Paul has a vocation; but this vocation, which might motivate a differently constituted individual to pursue a brilliant career, can only lead Paul, such as he is, to a tragic end.

"Paul's Case" is the best story in *The Troll Garden*, and it is largely because the protagonist, his tragedy, and the implied view of art are all rather more complex and ambiguous than in the other stories. Indeed, most of these stories share a handful of flaws: they are a bit too self-conscious and simplistic in their devotion to art; they sometimes draw overly neat contrasts between artists and philistines; their view of prairie life is unrelievedly negative; and their prose is less taut and subtle than in Cather's later work. Yet such faults are hardly surprising; these stories, after all, reflect a young author's joy and wonder at discovering her vocation, her outrage at ordinary people's lack of understanding, and her dread of falling back into the world of her childhood. At their best, the stories effectively communicate an almost Jamesian sensitivity to the nuances, ironies, and tragedies of the artist's life, and burn with a passionate awareness that, as Cather wrote elsewhere, "the splendid things of life are few, after all, and so very easy to miss."

She further explores the life of art in *The Song of the Lark* (1915). This long, discursive novel, as Cather declares in its closing pages, is the story of "how a Moonstone girl found her way out of a vague, easy-going world into a life of disciplined endeavor." The girl is Thea Kronborg, daughter of an immigrant; the "vague, easy-going world" is that of her hometown, Moonstone, Colorado; and the "life of disciplined endeavor" is that of the great, internationally famous singer that Thea eventually becomes, thanks largely to the support of her family doctor, Howard Archie, and a magnanimous freight-train conductor named Ray Kennedy. Many people might think of life in a place like Moonstone as hard and disciplined, and of an artist's life as vague and easy-going; Cather disagrees. Though the lyrical title may suggest otherwise, this is a confident, even an arrogant book, without a trace of misty-eyed nostalgia; Thea is no sweet songbird, but an unsentimental, determined young woman who prefers the company of Mexicans and "rowdies" to that of "nice" girls, and who realizes that her siblings are "her natural enemies."

Cather paints a fine portrait of an artist in embryo. During her childhood Thea moves into an uncomfortable attic room whose acquisition, we are told, "was the beginning of a new era in Thea's life"; the room is an affectingly rendered symbol of Thea's

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artistic alienation, of her elevation beyond the world of her upbringing into the realm of art, and of the special hazards of her calling. When Thea leaves home to begin her career in Chicago, Cather, far from glossing over the girl's egoism, points out its utility:

> If youth did not matter so much to itself, it would never have the heart to go on. Thea was surprised that she did not feel a deeper sense of loss at leaving her old life behind her. It seemed, on the contrary, as she looked out at the yellow desert speeding by, that she had left very little. Everything that was essential seemed to be right there in the car with her. She lacked nothing. She felt even more compact and confident than usual.

The honesty of this passage gives it a surprising power. Less effective, perhaps, is a later section detailing a journey to the Southwest, where an encounter with old Indian art gives Thea a sense of connection and obligation to the artists of the past that serves to replace her lost sense of family attachment.

In *The Song of the Lark*, Cather demonstrates far more regard than in *The Troll Garden* for the frontier, whose newness and beauty mirror Thea's youth and talent. "There was a new song in that blue air," Cather writes, "which had never been sung in the world before." A similar appreciation for frontier life informs *O Pioneers!* (1914). Like *The Song of the Lark*, this novel is set on the Nebraska prairie and has as its heroine the smart, strong-willed child of an immigrant. John Bergson, in eleven years of farming, "had made but little impression upon the wild land he had come to tame"; but his daughter Alexandra, in the decades that follow, prospers by her intelligent and imaginative dedication to the goal of taming the soil. Like *The Song of the Lark*, the novel has a certain prairie-like expansiveness; Cather takes her time about making points, and allows herself ample room for touches of atmosphere, generalizations about man and nature, and descriptions of subsidiary characters. Consequently the book does not focus as steadily as it might on its heroine, who remains a bit too distant and impassive to be a thoroughly engaging character. But it is sensitive and authentic, and contains some captivating lyrical passages.

A more fully successful novel—with an even more sympathetic view of prairie life—is *My Antonia* (1918), whose narrator, a New York businessman named Jim Burden, recalls his relatively prosperous upbringing by grandparents in and near Black Hawk, Nebraska. In particular he remembers his childhood friend Antonia Shimerda, a less well-to-do Bohemian immigrant who is now a hardworking farm wife and mother and who, more than anyone else, represents to Jim "the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood." Like Thea and Alexandra, Antonia is no delicate flower of the frontier; indeed, Cather implicitly contrasts this sturdy, spirited, and often obnoxious girl with Jim's affected, "unimpressionable" wife, who (like Flavia in *The Troll Garden*) is an art patroness. The contrast between the apparent loathing for Nebraska that is embodied in a story like "A Wagner Matinée" and the affection and regional pride manifest throughout *My Antonia* is striking:

> July came on with that breathless, brilliant heat which makes the plains of Kansas and Nebraska the best corn country in the world. It seemed as if we could hear the corn growing in the night; under the stars one caught a faint crackling in the dewy, heavy-odored cornfields where the feathered stalks stood so juicy and green. . . . The cornfields were far apart in those times, with miles of wild grazing land between. It took a clear, meditative eye like my grandfather's to foresee that they would enlarge and multiply until they would be, not the Shimerdas' cornfields, or Mr. Bushy's, but the world's cornfields; that their yield would be one of the great economic facts, like the wheat crop of Russia, which underlie all the activities of men, in peace or war.

Despite the poetry of such passages, Cather's depiction of frontier life is never

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idyllic. In several of her novels, the Edenic imagery comes complete with a snake; in *My Antonia* it is a menacing rattler that Jim destroys with a spade. In *The Song of the Lark*, a tramp pollutes Moonstone's water supply and causes the death of several children by typhoid; in *My Antonia* there is an even more chilling episode concerning a pack of wolves that devour a wedding party. The story, though told in flashback by an immigrant and set in Russia, reinforces Jim and Antonia's sense of the ever-present threat in their own hostile environment.

My Antonia is superior in many ways to Cather's previous novels. In the simplicity of its story, the naturalness of its narrative voice, and the evocative rendering and emotionally disciplined handling of characters and regional settings that plainly derive from the author's childhood, *My Antonia* recalls *Huckleberry Finn*. The novel's plot feels less contrived than those of its predecessors, and Jim, for the most part, is an improvement over the digressive third-person narrators of Cather's earlier books. Finally, *My Antonia* offers a more sharply honed portrait of life on the frontier than either *The Song of the Lark* or *O Pioneers!*; it is as if Cather—who had, since 1906, been based mostly in New York—had finally lived away from Nebraska long enough to bring the meaning of her childhood into perfect focus and to celebrate, at this distance, the commendable aspects of prairie life.

Cather won the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours* (1922), but this long, windy novel represents a distinct falling-off from *My Antonia*. Claude Wheeler, a smart, restless boy with high principles and a "sharp disgust for sensuality," leaves his stolid, pious clan's Nebraska farm to attend college and finds himself drawn to the world of culture. Yet Claude, who despite this attraction obediently returns home after college, isn't as decisive or interesting as Thea Kronborg or Alexandra Bergson; his much-reiterated feeling that there must be "something splendid about life, if he could but find it!" comes off as vague and tiresome, and his abrupt marriage to an unsuitable local girl seems motivated mainly by plot necessities. Too often, he seems little more than a bundle of romantic clichés about youth. Though the book does contain some memorable characters and forceful scenes, one's principal impression is that Cather, for once, decided to indulge the expectations of the mass audience. Toward the end, rather than resolve Claude's struggle, she sets it aside altogether and ships him off to fight World War I. This section of the book is extremely synthetic, full of implausibly wholesome battlefield discourses and portentous bits of narration that (whether or not Hemingway was right about specific borrowings from *Birth of a Nation*) do bring to mind the corny solemnity and flag-waving of old war movies. One is especially pained by Cather's glib acceptance of the war's carnage on the grounds that it proves "men could still die for an idea"; the only imaginable defense of her vision of trench warfare is that the book's final chapters were written not to capture the truth of war but to comfort the mothers of dead soldiers.

An important element in *One of Ours* is Claude's dismay over the changes that his native region and its people have undergone since his boyhood: trees have been cut down, the land impoverished, and the residents grown more litigious, small-minded, lazy, and extravagant. "With prosperity," Cather writes, "came a kind of callousness; everybody wanted to destroy the old things they used to take pride in." This view is central to Cather's novels *A Lost Lady* (1923) and *The Professor's House* (1925). The eponymous lady of the first book, which opens in the late nineteenth century, is Marian Forrester, the wife of Captain Daniel Forrester, a retired railroad builder and the leading citizen of Sweet Water, Colorado. The novel's protagonist is Niel Herbert, the local judge's nephew, who admires Mrs. Forrester for her loveliness and charm but mostly for her loyalty to Captain Forrester, whom he comes to recognize, in later years, as one of the dreamers, "impractical to the point of magnificence," who had first settled

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the West, "a courteous brotherhood . . . who could conquer but could not hold." Contrasted with Forrester is Ivy Peters, a bully who grows up to be a lawyer, one of a breed of vulgar, covetous young operators who ravage the elegant and honorable world created by men like Forrester. After the Captain's death, Mrs. Forrester betrays him to Peters in more ways than one, and Niel comes to loathe her; yet he eventually pities her as a victim of the "sunset of the pioneer."

This short, beautifully shaped novel is one of Cather's finest, depicting the struggle between common and uncommon spirits with unprecedented power and plangency. Its characters, rendered with impressive economy, take on a grander, more symbolic dimension than those in her earlier books. Having in her earliest novels contrasted the wildness of the frontier with the cultural life of Europe and the East, Cather here identifies both with the Forresters, whose house is an emblem of civilized life and whose marsh symbolizes the frontier's natural beauty; Cather makes it clear that men like Peters—who ultimately buys and drains the marsh—are the enemies of both civilization and nature.

The Professor's House is a somewhat longer—and odder—book. It has two central figures. Godfrey St. Peter is a fifty-two-year-old Midwestern professor, author of a pioneering multi-volume history of the Spanish in North America, whose isolation from his family is symbolized by his attachment to the attic study that he refuses to abandon after moving to a new house with his wife. He feels less close to her, in fact, than to his memories of Tom Outland, a brilliant student with whom he had a "romance . . . of the mind." Outland, who grew up in New Mexico and died in the Great War, was the inventor of a vacuum device used in aviation, the income from which has enriched his sole heir and sometime fiancée, St.Peter's daughter Rosamond. The first and third parts of the novel depict St. Peter's strained relations with his wife and married daughters and with the repellent modern spirit that has prompted a fellow professor to sue for a cut of Tom's estate. The second part of the novel is Tom's story, told in the first person, of his unsuccessful attempt, prior to entering college, to interest the Smithsonian in an ancient Indian mesa settlement, his discovery of which inspired in him the same "filial piety" experienced by Thea on her introduction to Indian art.

Despite obvious differences between St. Peter and Tom, their impracticality and devotion to history are plainly meant to mark them both as uncommon men. But Tom is not merely uncommon; he is well-nigh incredible, a fanciful embodiment of the lost glories of the West. (To Rosamond's husband, who never met him, Tom has become a "glittering idea.") St. Peter is more plausible, but one has trouble completely buying his feelings about Tom; part of the problem is that although they are seen together in flashback, we never encounter them *à deux* in intellectual communion. Yet there is something compelling about the book, and about Cather's unusual means of linking the tangible St. Peter with the ethereal Tom. By stirring fragments of one character, as it were, into the other, Cather creates an arresting protagonist out of highly atypical materials.

If Cather's view of frontier life changed considerably over the years, so too did her attitude toward religion. Though her early novels treat sincere faith with respect, their view of religion itself is generally that of Dr. Archie in *The Song of the Lark*, who says that though "[a]ll religions are good," they speak of a "kindly Providence" when life is really ruled by "blind chance," and encourage passivity while the people who "really count" are those "who forge ahead and do something." A decided shift from Dr. Archie's view is evinced in *The Professor's House*, wherein Professor St. Peter belittles science for robbing mankind of sin: "We were better off when even the prosaic act of taking nourishment could have the magnificence of a sin. I don't think you help people by making their conduct of no

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importance—you impoverish them." Once upon a time, he argues, everyone was "a principal in a gorgeous drama with God. . . . And that's what makes men happy, believing in the mystery and importance of their own little individual lives. . . . Art and religion (they are the same thing, in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had."

This view of religion is central to *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), two novels about the early Catholic settlers of North America. The earlier novel is based on the true story of the first bishop of New Mexico and his vicar general. Bishop Jean Latour and Father Joseph Vaillant, as Cather calls them, form an interesting team, not unlike other pairs in her fiction. Latour, like Professor St. Peter and Jim Burden, was brought up in a relatively cultured, prosperous home, while Vaillant, like Tom Outland and Antonia, was raised to a life of physical activity and displays more of a common touch. The novel, set over several decades of the nineteenth century, is plotless and episodic, designed to demonstrate the quiet and unflashy heroism of the two priests. The prose, composed largely of simple declarative sentences, has an almost Biblical stateliness and authority; Cather requires but a few words to capture a character's temperament and imbue him with dimension and dignity. The book also has an almost Biblical sense of time. Years pass in a sentence; for the bishop to travel to and from a conference in Europe takes several months. By continually reminding us of the speed with which time advances, and of how "slight . . . but precious" (as she writes in *Shadows on the Rock*) a single life is, Cather underlines the folly of egoism and the importance of tradition. It is indicative of this book's somewhat different emphases, however, that when the Bishop speaks about the obligation of the present to the past, he makes reference not to the artistic heritage that so impressed Thea Kronborg and Tom Outland but to a bowl of soup prepared by Father Joseph. "[T]his is not the work of one man," the Bishop points out. "It is the result of a constantly refined tradition. There are nearly a thousand years of history in this soup."

Death Comes for the Archbishop has been accused of sentimentality; and, admittedly, a few of the book's minor figures reflect an overly sanguine authorial outlook. A young woman, rescued by the priests from a sociopathic husband, recovers all too easily; and Cather insists upon hailing Kit Carson as a noble frontiersman in the Tom Outland mold, a view which renders her helpless to account for his subsequent participation in a massacre of Indians. It does seem to be a valid complaint, moreover, that for all the people whose lives they touch, Latour and Vaillant are not seen interacting in any meaningful way with anyone but each other.

Other structural curiosities are a deliberate part of the book's thematic design. Though the prologue (set in Rome) seems to prepare us for a story about the dramatic spiritual transformation of the American Southwest, there is no suggestion that the aloof, erudite Latour effects any such change; late in the book, he wonders whether his talents would have better served the Church in a part of the world more civilized than the New Mexico diocese. Yet he concludes that "God had his reasons" and that perhaps "something would remain through all the years to come; some ideal, or memory, or legend." This, in Cather's view, appears to be the great value of this Bishop to New Mexico: not as a miracle worker but as a "glittering idea" (like Tom Outland) to inspire later generations. Perhaps it is for this reason that the book's title refers not to the Bishop's lifetime of commitment but to the death of the archbishop that he becomes in old age, a death that makes possible his magnification into a mythic figure.

Shadows on the Rock, which takes us to the other end of North America, likewise features a pioneering bishop, the retired Father Hector, whose "rare qualities" might, at first blush, seem wasted on the frontier. The novel, a meandering account of life in the "rock-set town" of Québec City during a single winter in the late seventeenth century,

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focuses largely on young Cécile Auclair and her pharmacist father, who, though "a natural city-dweller" and "not a man of action," is, in his devotion to sensible but unfashionable medical practices, a true pioneer. The novel is highly dexterous and evocative, but much of its interest derives from its similarities to its more formidable predecessor. Both books contain tales of miracles and atrocities: a story in *Shadows on the Rock*, for example, concerns a Montréal woman who becomes a hermit and is visited by angels, while one in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* recounts the horrific punishment of a friar for his exploitative treatment of Indians. Many of these anecdotes are not a part of the main narrative but are rather part of local history or legend; they are, apparently, what the commonfolk in these places have instead of literature, and the joy of these people in hearing about miracles would seem to be, in Cather's view, the frontier equivalent of an aesthetic *frisson*. For in miracles, she writes in *Shadows on the Rock*, "the vague worship and devotion of the simple-hearted assumes a form. From being a shapeless longing, it becomes a beautiful image; a dumb rapture becomes a melody that can be remembered and repeated; and the experience of a moment, which might have been a lost ecstasy, is made an actual possession and can be bequeathed to another."

It is no coincidence that the protagonists of both *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock* are French. Since, to Cather, the French are the "most civilized people in Europe," their early experiences as New World settlers make for an especially striking contrast between civilization and wilderness, and can better illustrate the view, articulated in *Shadows on the Rock*, that "[w]hen an adventurer carries his gods with him into a remote and savage country, the colony he founds will, from the beginning, have graces, traditions, riches of the mind and spirit." Both novels are informed by the belief that the special hardships of the New World make for greater heroes and saints. Men like Latour and Vaillant, we are told, "threw themselves naked upon the heart of a country that was calculated to try the endurance of giants. . . . Surely these endured *Hunger, Thirst, Cold, Nakedness*, of a kind beyond any conception St. Paul and his brethren could have had." Likewise, Cécile contrasts the travails of European saints with those of North American martyrs: "To be thrown into the Rhone or the Moselle, to be decapitated at Lyon,—what was that to the tortures the Jesuit missionaries endured at the hands of the Iroquois, in those savage, interminable forests?"

Compared to their predecessors, Cather's last two novels are surprisingly bland and conventional. *Lucy Gayheart* (1935) reads like a shorter, paler version of *The Song of the Lark*. Set in the early years of this century, it is the story of a small-town Midwestern girl who falls in love with a famous Chicago baritone for whom she works as a rehearsal pianist. When he dies in a boating accident, she leaves Chicago and, back home again, is slighted by her old boyfriend; after a period of grief, she finds herself being drawn to "Life itself" as to a sweetheart, and resolves to return to "a world that strove for excellence"; soon afterward, she perishes while attempting to skate on thin ice in the Platte River. The novel is an unsatisfying one: though it has the shape and concentration of a short story, its depiction of romance (a rare ingredient in a Cather novel) is highly unconvincing, as are the two accidents. Similar problems afflict *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), set during the 1850s in the Virginia country of Cather's early childhood. Sapphira, an aging plantation mistress, has developed such resentment toward Nancy, a young mulatto slave, that when the mistress's nephew presses his attentions upon the girl, Sapphira's daughter, fearing that her mother has encouraged him to seduce Nancy, helps the girl flee to Canada. Sapphira's family members all have a degree of moral complexity, and their relationships are convincing in their ambivalence; yet the story is never more than mildly interesting, and both major black characters are one-

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dimensional, with Nancy coming off as a vague (and non-tragic) gesture toward the stereotype of the tragic mulatto. It must be said, too, that both the catastrophic conclusion of *Lucy Gayheart* and the happy ending of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* strike one as equally slick.

Yet these relatively slight novels are the exceptions in a deeply satisfying—and abundantly human—oeuvre. Cather can, of course, write beautifully about nature, and evinces a deep appreciation for the romance of the West; but to the mature Cather, nature is highly equivocal—both mundane and sublime, at once an adversary and a source of inspiration. And always more important to her than the essence of nature is its role in the drama of man's self-realization. She agrees with Tom Outland that "there is something stirring about finding evidences of human labour and care in the soil of an empty country," and with the priest in *The Professor's House* who says that "[w]herever humanity has made the hardest of all starts and lifted itself out of mere brutality, is a sacred spot." In *O Pioneers!*, a rhapsodic description of Alexandra's farm, which "seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious," soon gives way to a consideration of how "the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it," has bent to Alexandra's will. "The history of every country," Cather writes, "begins in the heart of a man or a woman."

Cather's fascination with human endowment and potential pervades her fiction. She is a master at describing people, and the tender attentiveness of many of her descriptions—of, for instance, the old churchgoing woman in *The Song of the Lark* whose "face was brown, and worn away as rocks are worn by water"—recalls Mary Cassatt, with whom she shares an eye for the comeliness and dignity of people engaged in selfless and purposeful activity. Cather has a gift, too, for perceiving the essential points of similarity and difference between people, for delineating the subtle transformations that people undergo as the result of the passage of time and changes in location and circumstance, and for detailing the alterations in demeanor, carriage, and aspect that follow upon these transformations. Cather recognizes that it is a rare gift in people to be able to recognize rare gifts in others, and knows how much of life depends on chance; she has an appreciation for what Professor St. Peter calls "the fine, the almost imaginary obligations," and knows that the way in which people observe or fail to observe those obligations tells much about their characters. Yet she can also acknowledge the value of such vain and foolish women as Marian Forrester in *A Lost Lady* and Doña Isabella in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, whose frailties of character are excusable because (as the Bishop says) they bring a touch of *"poésie"* to the frontier.

Yet there are serious shortcomings in Cather's portrayal of human experience. She is far better at developing individual characters, and at describing attachments that are not very close—or that involve children rather than grown-ups—than at convincingly depicting intimate and gratifying adult relationships. Her fiction contains very few love affairs and not many warm friendships; for the most part, she avoids depicting romance, and when she does, it is usually perfunctory (as in *One of Ours*) or unconvincing (as in *Lucy Gayheart*). Doubtless this failing is related to the fact that Cather regards romantic love and family ties as more of a hindrance and a distraction to uncommon people than a source of support. It cannot be denied that this is a serious —indeed, almost a crippling—weakness. Yet it is balanced, I think, by an abundance of strengths. What is remarkable, indeed, is not that Cather labored under such a deficiency, but that she managed in spite of it to produce fiction that exemplified, even as it celebrated, the ability of uncommon people to do magnificent things.

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Poems *by William Virgil Davis, William Baer, Mary Stewart Hammond & Robley Wilson*

One year

One year and now one day

have come and gone. So long,
so short, the way we count
what stays, what goes. Winter
has come again. The snow
falls heavy and slow and wind
rattles in barren limbs as I walk
these hills alone. Just here
she lies, without a stone,
in this place no one could know.
Mother, I remember, and gather
the years, so long, so short.

The years so fast, so slow.

—*William Virgil Davis*

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Walking from Conimbriga

Within that early, Portuguese, morning light,
the stranger roamed about the Roman ruins,
amid the shattered columns, gardens, and baths—
all crushed by barbarous hordes in 458 . . .
And later, at the crowded railway station,
he learned about the vicious transit strike—
and how they'd stranded everyone, young and old,
and stopped the country dead in its tracks.

Beneath the burning skies and blazing sun,
making my way, ten miles north, to Coimbra,
I walked beside an aged woman in black,
who had, without complaint, embraced her fate.
"Never succumb." She gently whispered and warned,
slowly passing the lightly tinted fields,
"My son, in Beira, lost *all* he had—
but all we've lost are hours in the mid-day sun."

—*William Baer*

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Found poem on the coffee table

We were buying redleaf lettuce and arugula
from the Korean greengrocer to give us a
leg up on outliving, by two to three months,
ourselves, when we spotted the tulips,
yellows, whites, orange-y pinks, and blood reds,
which sit, now, like colors from a crayon box,
in a white Wedgewood notion of a Grecian urn
on the coffee table surrounded by mounds of books—
Wordsworth and The Age of English Romanticism;
Larkin; Lessing; Bettelheim; Berke's *Tyranny of Malice: Character and Culture*; a roll of out-sized wooden dice
canted on the *Daedalus* issue on Eastern Europe—
and, oh, how, with a copper penny dropped in the water
for longevity, the way a drop of gin
brings lilacs back, they arch, penetrating space
vertically like steeples, diagonally like dancers
rising in slow-motion, the stems, tensing with
gulped water, lifting, straightening, yes, craning
up into the darkened living room
as if they were inhabited by the holy ghost,
transmitted by satellite from the squares of Timisoara,
Budapest, Prague, Crakow to small-screen television,
of this rolling away of the stone,
this new thrust away from despots
charged by the ions of Caesar's coin.

—*Mary Stewart Hammond*

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The lesson

Why nothing lived for her
she could not guess,
only some mornings when
she woke and dressed
one tulip at the sill
was bowed inside,
its petals splayed or dropped
where it had died,

or in the garden plot
beyond the hedge
some new natural ill
had visited
and left, for her remorse,
chrysanthemum
or lily stricken brown
and withering.

Lying beside her love
she shared his breath,
lamenting in the dark
her knack with death
until, after a time,
she was disturbed
to feel his heart had stopped
for her black words.

To such sad ladies none
can give advice,
unless to say love is
as loving does,
and there are always men
—one I know well—
risking themselves to learn
what beauty tells.

—Robley Wilson

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Art

Revaluating de Staël

by Jed Perl

When the Phillips Collection announced that it was organizing a small retrospective of works by Nicolas de Staël, the New York artists I talk to all the time believed that this would be a show well worth the trip down to Washington, D.C.[1] De Staël—who was born in St. Petersburg in 1914 and committed suicide in France, where he'd spent his adult life, at the age of forty—was an international star in the art world of the Fifties. Then his star faded fast. Anyone who arrived on the scene after his last retrospective, which came to the Guggenheim in 1966, has only a fragmented view of the oeuvre that he produced in just over a decade. Yet many of us have seen paintings of quality here and there: the earth-toned abstractions, with their basket weave of trunk-like forms; the later landscapes, with their flat areas of bolder, sometimes high-keyed color. And seeing a few paintings could make one want to see more of the work of this artist whose career flared up in Paris just after the war, when the city was no longer quite the capital of art that it had been. The Phillips show has been put together from American collections (with the exception of some drawings), but I think that it gives us a well-rounded view of de Staël. As Eliza E. Rathbone, who is Curator of the Phillips, points out in the preface to the catalogue of "Nicolas de Staël in America," in his heyday the artist was collected widely and wisely on this side of the Atlantic.

The Phillips has, in short, done the right show about the right artist. It's the sort of project that no other museum in America seems willing to take on, and in that sense "De Staël in America" takes its place in a string of innovative Phillips exhibitions that has included, over the past few years, shows devoted to the paintings and pastels of Redon, the late work of Braque, and the American contemporary Leland Bell. Having said this, I feel that I must pause . . . If only de Staël's work could have lived up to the fine treatment it has received. Seen start to finish, de Staël's turns out to be a thin, unsatisfying career. Of the fifty-plus paintings in the show, maybe ten are works of consequence—and they're almost all in the first room, among the abstractions of 1948 and 1949. There, de Staël defines a new kind of Parisian elegance—call it *la guerre est finie* elegance. In the second room, where the abstractions begin to suggest bleak landscapes, he defines an idea of empty elegance. (And it is an idea, though an idea he never really works out.) After that, he goes representational and produces flatulent elegance. Much of the work in the latter couple of rooms isn't even flatulent—it's just empty.

1 "Nicolas de Staël in America" is on view at the Phillips Collection through September 9, then will travel to the Cincinnati Art Museum (October 16-December 31). A catalogue by Eliza E. Rathbone, with essays by Nicholas Fox Weber and John Richardson, has been published by the Phillips Collection (192 pages, $30 paper).

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Yet the work has an interest (albeit a morbid interest), partly on account of those fine, early abstractions, partly because the career of this tall, handsome artist (he looks gorgeous in studio photographs) is a significant piece of the puzzle of postwar art.

De Staël was born into a wealthy and aristocratic Russian family. The catalogue tells us that at birth he was "appointed to become a page at the Imperial Court of Czar Nicolas II." In 1919, in the wake of the revolution, the family had to leave Russia for Poland; de Staël's parents died soon after (the catalogue doesn't give causes of death); and de Staël and his two sisters were sent to Brussels to be brought up by M. and Mme Emmanuel Fricero, wealthy Russian expatriates. By the time he was twenty, de Staël was studying art in Brussels. In 1937, he met Jeannine Guillou, a painter; they had a daughter, and were together until Jeannine's death in 1946. De Staël traveled a good deal in his twenties, making an itinerary that would have been quite usual for young artists at the time: he went to Paris, Provence, Spain, Italy, and spent a year in Morocco. He studied for three weeks (!) at Léger's school (1938). With the declaration of war he enlisted in the Foreign Legion, serving briefly, in 1940, in Tunisia. Little of his work up until then has survived. It seems to be only after his return to France, when he and Jeannine were living in Nice and became friends with Alberto Magnelli, Sonia Delaunay, and Jean Arp, that de Staël really became engaged with the art of his time.

The names of the artists that de Staël knew and exhibited with in the little over a decade left to him suggest a world that we in New York now only dimly perceive. (Parisians, I dare say, don't remember it much more clearly.) De Staël showed at the Jeanne Bucher Gallery in 1944, and this brought him into the circle of abstract artists then active in Paris. He already knew Sonia Delaunay and Arp; he met Kandinsky shortly before the latter's death. Many of the abstract artists whom de Staël met in the Forties had come to Paris, like him, from outside of France. Magnelli, who was born in 1888 in Florence, was doing some impressive, dark-toned canvases, with forms that are oddly configured and sharply angled. César Domela, born in Amsterdam in 1900, was another painter of severe, abstract forms, though not (I believe) as gifted as Magnelli. André Lanskoy, born in Moscow in 1902, worked in a somewhat more painterly manner. He and de Staël became fast friends; it was sometimes said that they shared a similar Russian temperament.

In Michel Seuphor's 1957 *Dictionary of Abstract Art*, de Staël is presented as a major figure in the period "after the death of Kandinsky." Seuphor comments on the enormous number of younger artists who were then painting abstractly in Paris; on the emergence of Magnelli, after a period of representational work (in the Twenties), as an important abstractionist; and on the formation, in 1946, of an abstract salon, the Salon de Réalités Nouvelles (de Staël was on the organizing committee as well as an exhibitor). While Seuphor observes the dangers involved in evaluating the art of one's own moment, he does say that, of the painters then in their thirties and forties, the three who seem most worthy of consideration are de Staël, Hans Hartung, and Wols. All of their work—the impasto oil paint of de Staël, the bold calligraphic strokes of Hartung, and the ink-lines-dissolving-into-watercolor of Wols—marks a turning away from the uninflected surfaces that had characterized abstract painting since the end of World War I.

In the Forties, painterly abstraction was, of course, developing on both sides of the Atlantic. Certainly, nobody in the well-mannered Old World could compete with the no-holds-barred exuberance of Hofmann, de Kooning, and Pollock. But considering how paltry the results of much of that New York City exuberance are looking forty or fifty years later (which is not to deny the first-rate work done by Hofmann and de Kooning), it would do well for us to reconsider how Parisian artists fared, working as they were with rather more reduced formats and more inward-turning structures.

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De Staël's early abstractions (from 1943 and 1944) are constructed of loose arrays of crisscrossing lines. As they connect, these lines form overlapping shapes, quite a few of which look like sails on ships. The paintings tend to be built up from a dark ground, with the artist moving toward lighter values: in the *Abstraction* in this show the shapes are pale, grayish; in the long horizontal *Astronomy*, not included here, they're brighter—blues and oranges and greens. These paintings, which are related to paintings that Magnelli and Lanskoy were doing around the same time, are, at best, journeyman work. There's something weakish, indecisive about de Staël's handling of the paint. His brushwork is, from point to point, a little too crisp or a little too casual. He's just laying in forms, without much sense of how to make the painting compelling as a made thing.

Then, in 1946 or so, without really altering this structure of crisscrossing forms, de Staël hits upon a way to give his compositions a dense texture that a viewer experiences as presence—and even, sometimes, as imminence. Perhaps the finest painting at the Phillips is *Timberyard*, from 1949. Here the surface is an impacted mass of slender greenish-tannish forms that push up against one another and sometimes break through one another. Though de Staël's title evokes felled trees, the painting is actually more like a section of some geological formation that's made up of layers of many different kinds of rock. (Another good painting is called *Trapped Rocks*.) The forms aren't outlined; rather, each is made of thickly built-up strokes of paint. There's an aliveness to de Staël's insistent build-up of paint. As one studies the darker and lighter bits, or a gray or dark brown segment that pierces through a lighter segment, one feels as if one is examining a series of subtle geological shifts, movements, evolutions. Here—as in *Trapped Rocks*, *North*, and *Calme*—there's nothing that definitively makes us think of a landscape. The sense of gentle light playing over shifting forms suggests weather and changes of weather, but these suggestions are contained within the utterly satisfying frontality of an opaque abstract space.

Without a doubt, de Staël's breakthrough in 1947 had a great deal to do with his friendship with Braque—I imagine it as a sort of mentor-student relationship. Their friendship had begun in 1944, and was quite intense by 1947, when de Staël (who was represented by the prestigious dealer Louis Carré and selling quite well) rented a studio at 7 rue Gauguet, near Braque. The de Staëls from the good years—they are over by 1950—unite a French expressionist idea of paint as conveying the character of lived experience with an abstract idea of the picture as constructed out of impassive, generalized forms. The abstract idea comes from Kandinsky, the Delaunays, Magnelli, Arp: people de Staël had gotten to know early in the Forties. The French expressionist idea comes from Braque—who was at this time beginning his series of *Studio* paintings; yet to come was the sublimely simplified nature poetry of the fields and seascapes. How de Staël's synthesis of Constructivism and expressionism came about isn't really all that hard to see: I would not be surprised if Braque actually gave him some pointers. While Braque was never an abstract painter, he and Picasso had created the conditions for Constructivism, and the idea of a space that is made out of interlocking, basket-woven, or hatched forms is one that appears frequently in Braque's work of the Forties and Fifties. There is also something of Paul Klee's striated, geologically layered surfaces in those de Staëls of 1947-49; and this brings to mind the fact that Braque—like other artists de Staël knew, such as Kandinsky and the Delaunays—was an admirer (and friend) of Klee. In any event, the forces that go together to make up those de Staëls are not hard to locate, which doesn't detract from the fact that he painted beautiful paintings, certainly far more beautiful than those of artists who worked then and later in a similar vein, such as Serge Poliakoff, Jean Bazaine, and Alfred Manessier. But the very fact that de Staël's finest work can so easily be explained as the product of a particular

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moment may also suggest why everything fell apart for him so rapidly after that. De Staël had the brilliance to seize on a promising idea, but that is a very different thing from sustaining a full career.

John Richardson, the art critic and biographer of Picasso, has contributed a very suggestive memoir to the Phillips catalogue. In "Remembering de Staël" he helps us understand what it was that sent de Staël away from abstraction toward increasingly inept impersonations of the landscape and still-life styles of a score of School of Paris greats. Here we have a close-up look at the early-middle-aged artist, at the time when he and his wife, Françoise Chapouton (a distant relative of Jeannine's, whom he'd met and married shortly after Jeannine's death), and their (now three) children were dividing their time between Paris and the South of France. Richardson describes a "Tartar giant" whose "feverish eagerness [was] tempered with Slavic melancholy." They met when de Staël appeared unannounced at the house in Provence that Richardson shared with the great collector of Cubism, Douglas Cooper. Richardson was "taken aback. Cooper, a touchy man at the best of times, was currently fulminating against the way abstract painting had taken over the School of Paris. Staël was seen as one of the culprits. Would there be a brouhaha? I need not have worried. Staël (at the age of two) had not been elected to the czar's College of Pages for nothing. His courtesy was more than a match for Cooper's truculence, and within minutes a fast new friendship was born." A page later, Cooper is announcing that de Staël is "The only aristocrat I ever met who knows how to paint." But then this is nothing to de Staël's conquest of Braque. According to Richardson, de Staël "was the only young artist I ever heard Braque speak of with unqualified enthusiasm: 'a real painter,' he would say, 'with a real sense of painting.' For him this was his highest recommendation."

In the Forties it was not difficult to meet the grand old figures of the School of Paris. They were around, and they were often eager to make contact with the young. But with de Staël, getting close to a living legend like Braque, and being accepted by him, may have kicked off an almost self-abnegating desire to emulate the old man. It seems to me that, at some point at the end of the Forties, de Staël decided to be the good young man who would save the great tradition that the old men felt was slipping away. In the second room at the Phillips show, this process has already begun. De Staël wants to be one of the fathers. He starts to reconfigure his tan and gray planes into larger, more simplified arrangements that invoke the seascapes of Courbet and of Braque. He's trying for French naturalistic classicism. Here de Staël's color is still eloquent; and when one glances around the room, one does alight on several paintings that seem closely worked, yet there isn't a single painting that ultimately makes any sense. De Staël is alluding to a tradition; he's not inside it. The paintings are vague and tenuous: this is you-get-the-idea painting.

It's around this time (in 1949) that de Staël begins to use the palette knife. He wants to achieve the painterly cuisine of Courbet and Braque, and he uses the palette knife as a short cut, and it has a disastrous effect. The impacted surfaces that he'd worked up with the brush begin to look manufactured and impersonal: it's untrue grit. And then, in order to be all things to all School of Paris painters, de Staël decides to embrace full color. By 1952, with the *Football* series, he's a rehasher of old School of Paris brights. What Robert Delaunay had done superbly in series of his football players and runners, de Staël now does crassly: his people are just palette-knife slabs of raucous tube color. After that there are moments of authenticity: *Landscape of Provence* (1953) has some beautiful bluish whites, and the single tree reflects some genuine feeling for a place. But the descent is really appalling. By the time of *Still Life at Ménarbes* (1953), de Staël is banging slabs of red, magenta, and green against one another as if they were interchangeable. *Large Orange Nude* (1954)

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is made of three equally hot, equally weighted areas of color—orange, yellow, magenta. (There is no end to what de Staël doesn't know about the figure.) *The Seine* (1954)—white and gunmetal blue—is the kind of flavorless, forgettable painting I'd imagine seeing over a couch in a Castro Convertible showroom. Maybe I say that because de Staël inspired the kind of paintings they hang in those showrooms; but I don't think he does it much better than his imitators. I know there are people who will say, "Oh, but aren't some of the little seascapes lovely?" Well, they don't really hold up. They look okay, a few of them, at first glance; but most any painting by Marquet is a hundred times better.

The Phillips Collection is a perfect—a cruelly perfect—place to observe how and why de Staël went wrong. Here are the very kinds of Braques and Matisses that were his models and his undoing. De Staël took their near-mystical end-of-career simplifications as his starting point, but he had none of the painting culture that went into those simplifications, which, on close inspection, aren't so simple. A painting like Braque's *Philodendron* (1952) is composed of dozens of variations of texture, attacks of the brush, qualities of color. Matisse's *Egyptian Curtain* (1948) has three different zones, three different spiraling movements, each treated in a different way, not to mention a bowl of pomegranates that have been drawn one-by-one. From these extraordinary inventions, we turn to de Staël's *Fruits* (1954): everything is treated the same, everything is flat as a pancake, and those pears look like withered gourds.

Nicolas de Staël ended up as a School of Paris *pasticheur*. His mistake, as I said before, was to believe that he could build on Braque's and Matisse's conclusions—on the work that they were doing after they'd been working for fifty years. It is by no means only his mistake, or only a French mistake. (Many of the simplifications of the American Abstract Expressionists were based on equally shaky assumptions.) De Staël had talent and flair, but he wasn't a taxonomist of the heroic period of modern European art, and I suspect that those who can't or won't take the modern movement apart will never put it together in a new way. Nevertheless, de Staël had his few good years. Those beautiful, plangent abstractions are going to live. The show one wants to see is called "The Abstract Paintings of Nicolas de Staël: 1947-1949."

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Jennifer Bartlett and the crisis of public art

by Eric Gibson

Imagine for a moment New York is not the overbuilt metropolis so painfully familiar to us today, but a city still in formation. You have moved into an apartment overlooking a rubble-strewn lot—to be called Central Park—precisely for the opportunity its landscaped spaces will offer for walking, playing with the children, or otherwise temporarily sloughing off life's cares.

Only after you move in do you discover that the developers haven't hired a landscape architect to do the job, but an artist, one who boasts her ignorance of gardens but who nonetheless (working with an architect and a landscape architect) proposes to turn it into a kind of gigantic environmental sculpture made of flowers and hedges—something, in other words, that makes a mockery of the idea of taking one's ease in a city park.

Welcome to Jennifer Bartlett's *South Gardens*, the most unpopular public-art idea since Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*.

Jennifer Bartlett's project would occupy a three-and-one-half-acre site at the southernmost end of Battery Park City and adjacent to one of the high-rise apartment complexes whose residents it is intended to serve. Considering the isolated location of the complex in terms of ordinary urban amenities, its residents are justified in expecting that this plot of land would be landscaped to provide, well, a *park*, an oasis within the surrounding desert of concrete and glass. After all, hadn't the Battery Park City Authority, at every moment in the project's development, been scrupulous about taking into account the needs of the people who were acutally supposed to live there? Apparently not, for now those people are well on the way to getting an outrageously expensive monument to artistic ego and bureaucratic intransigence.

In its original form, Miss Bartlett's design called for organizing the plot according to a grid plan (one of her favorite devices) in order to create twenty-four "rooms," each one fifty feet square and filled with plants of all varieties shaped into such objects as television sets, missiles, and pianos. In other words, Miss Bartlett's horticultural conceit would so overwhelm the space that there would be virtually no place in it for the public, for whom, nominally, it is intended, and who through their tax dollars have provided some of the funds for its creation. Her "rooms" would be bordered by hedges high enough to keep sufficient daylight from reaching the plants and so keeping them alive. The whole plot would be surrounded by a concrete sea-wall high enough to obscure any view of New York Harbor and the Statue of Liberty—arguably one of the few good reasons for moving into that neighborhood. *The Wall Street Journal* has reported that the firm of Bruce Kelly/David Varnell Landscape Architects, one of Miss Bartlett's original partners in the project, was fired from it after calling her design "arbitrary and amateurish." What's more, the cost of laying out the gardens, according to *The New York Observer*, would be $12 million, while its

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upkeep would run between $250,000 and $400,000 each year.

In every respect, the *South Gardens* controversy is of a piece with the larger controversy surrounding the role of public art today. At the heart of both is a debate about what is more important, art or amenities. It is not surprising that Miss Bartlett's design is admired by critics (Paul Goldberger of *The New York Times* among them) while being disliked by the people who are going to have to use it—or rather accommodate themselves to it. (The project is so unpopular that for a time last year, Miss Bartlett was the target of an anonymous poster campaign in lower Manhattan.) Nor is it surprising that Miss Bartlett's proposal is full of the sort of egoistic arrogance that informs the creation of public art nowadays, an arrogance one had thought might be tempered by Richard Serra's experiences with *Tilted Arc*.

First, there is the scale and cost of the project, both of which testify to the lopsided conception of the importance of these projects in the eyes of their promoters. Then, of course, there is the arrogance of the artist herself. In a much-quoted statement, Miss Bartlett said, "The only thing I was interested in doing was a very complicated garden, which would cost an enormous amount of money and be very expensive to maintain." It's all rather reminiscent of Mr. Serra, who insisted (and came to grief because of it) that he wanted his sculpture to be confrontational. The only difference is that Miss Bartlett was speaking in jest, at least partly. In the same interview she said that, being basically uninterested in undertaking such a project, she had come before the Battery Park City Authority only after numerous appeals to do so, hoping to discourage its members from hiring her by making extreme demands. It inspires little faith in the way such projects are managed to note that she was awarded the commission in any case.

The Bartlett commission also illustrates the arrogance of the public-art lobby, which, bloated by its success over the last two decades, has, like all bureaucracies, come to regard the task of preserving its prerogatives as more important than serving the public. The main agent of its success has been the so-called "one-percent law," which mandates that the federal government—as well as scores of state and local governments—allot one percent of a new building's construction cost to original works of art. This law has, of course, let loose a tidal wave of public art, a great deal of it mediocre or worse. And it has not been without its more comical moments. In the early 1980s King County in Washington State decided to build a new jail. Because the county had a one-percent law on the books, it found itself in the position of setting aside $600,000 of the facility's $6 million cost for art commissions. Horrified legislators managed to reduce the budget to a mere $165,000, but the commissions were still awarded.

The one-percent laws have done something besides blanket our cities with works of art. They have promoted the idea that public-art commissions are *necessary*, something the public must benignly accept—and pay for. I remember my astonishment a few years ago at a conference on public art when I discovered that the delegates weren't interested in exploring any real issues but rather in devising ways to overcome all obstacles, present and future, to the installation of art in public places.

Yet, it is in no small measure ironic that this latest brouhaha should involve Battery Park City, a project that aimed from the very beginning to be a model of intelligent urban development, and that made it a point to avoid the mistakes of others. One such "mistake" would have been to commission "plop art"—sculptural monoliths placed in front of buildings with no thought to the relationship between the two or of their impact on the public. Though the Authority took it for granted that works of art would be installed at Battery Park, it also determined that a new approach to their creation would be adopted: collaboration—one of the new buzzwords in the public-art lexicon. Instead of going their separate ways, architects and artists would work together to

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produce an integrated, harmonious ensemble in which the buildings would not overwhelm the works of art, and in which the art would make no attempt to upstage the architecture or antagonize the pedestrians. What resulted was a complex notable for the blandness of its public art. R. M. Fischer is present at Battery Park City, but his penchant for glitzy light- and fountain-sculptures has been socialized into a ceremonial arch reminiscent of something out of Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis*. Richard Artschwager, known for his camp, Pop-Minimalist furniture-objects, is represented by a bench. And so on. Neither Fischer nor Artschwager is a particularly good artist, and Artschwager in particular is an odd one to ask for a public piece. His ironic constructions are too private, too hermetic to function successfully out of doors.

To see clearly that the Battery Park City Authority has sought to chart a new course in public art, one needn't walk over to the World Trade Center to study the blunders of the Bad Old Days; one need only proceed south, near the site of the Bartlett garden, for a look at another of the Authority's commisions. Titled *South Cove*, this work by Mary Miss is an enormous wooden jetty built out into the river but curving in on itself (a reference to Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, perhaps?). It is topped by a lookout shaped to recall the crown of the Statue of Liberty, which is visible from that spot. Both in scale and physical reach—upward and out—it is by far the most assertive work of art anywhere in the complex. Yet one can't help thinking that it is only here, safely out in the water where it couldn't intrude the way *Tilted Arc* did in Federal Plaza, that such a work could be allowed. At least, that's what one thought until Jennifer Bartlett's proposal came along.

There's an irresolvable conflict embedded at the center of the whole public-art idea: the demands of modern artistic self-expression leave little room for the sort of compromises and accommodations necessary for it to be successful aesthetically and publicly. This does not mean good public art is impossible. The best recent examples of it are those that have a definite character yet join disparate —even abstract—elements into a whole. The swaying vertical needles of *Three Red Lines*, George Rickey's sculpture outside the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, are a distinct and welcome presence on the Mall. Their motion simultaneously evokes urban motion and criticizes its frenzied pace with an unhurried, breeze-initiated rhythm. Noguchi's plazas and public playgrounds succeed both as works of large-scale sculpture and as urban amenities. They are examples of an artist addressing himself to the way a city is used.

Looking backward, there is, of course, that old standby, the fountain. In Rome, for example, the fountain performs several useful functions. It acts as a symbolic climax to the pedestrian's journey into the space of the square in which it sits, telling him that he has arrived. It draws that square together, giving it a focus. It provides a congenial backdrop for the activity of the square, even as the continuous play of water mirrors the constant human traffic about and through it. Measured against that standard—and why shouldn't it be?—Jennifer Bartlett's *South Gardens* fails miserably.

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Theater

Shake-down and stand-up

by Donald Lyons

Odd items in the newspaper have set many a modern writer to thinking. Matthew Arnold was struck by the brutal phrase, "Wragg is in custody," used by a journal to refer to a woman from a workhouse who had murdered her infant. He opposed its "short, bleak and inhumane" cadence to some sonorously complacent fatuities by two Victorian politicians. Masterworks like *Madame Bovary* and *An American Tragedy* have been, in part, set going by their authors' chancing on an article. And much pioneer theatrical Naturalism—early Ibsen like *Pillars of Society*; Büchner's *Woyzeck*—had an air of being ripped from newspapers. A freak incident, reported in dry journalese, has sometimes served in centerless times the function of ancient myth—shaping, connecting, and interpreting life.

Nothing novel then in that John Guare, struck by a clipping, has from it fashioned a play, *Six Degrees of Separation*, now at the Lincoln Center Theater. The real story was about one David Hampton, a black youth of nineteen from Buffalo who in 1983 gained admission to certain influential New York homes by posing as the son of Sidney Poitier and as the college friend of his hosts' children. He proceeded to steal some items and, in at least one case, introduce and bed "a scruffy young man." Turned in by one of his dupes, Hampton was in custody and did time. His hosts included the dean of the Columbia School of Journalism, the president of Channel 13, and the actor currently starring as Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

It appears a promising anecdote, and Mr. Guare has concocted a clever drawing-room comedy. *Six Degrees of Separation* (the title refers to the six mutual acquaintances that can supposedly connect any two people on earth) is a ninety-minute, one-act piece centering on an art dealer and his wife, Flan and Ouisa—the wife is by far the fuller character—upon whom conniving and convincing Paul intrudes for a memorable evening. Though they hang a Kandinsky and a Cézanne, their heart is really in manipulating the currently inflated market in masters and they are about to entertain a rich South African mine owner in hopes of extracting two million dollars to seed a deal. Aquiver with greed, Flan and Ouisa see their courtship of this obviously (to Mr. Guare's audience) "tainted" money interrupted by Paul, bleeding from a "mugging" and asking a night's shelter on the basis of his evident familiarity with their collegiate children. Paul cooks pasta, charms the Boer, and orates at length—to the applause of the audience—upon his "college thesis" (lost in the "mugging") that treated *Catcher in the Rye* and the commercialization of the imagination in America. He has everyone eating out of his hand until he gratuitously imports a hustler, is discovered (much nude scampering on stage), and flees with an inkwell, a watercolor of a dog, and the favorite pink shirt of his hosts' son (the last a gift from Ouisa).

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The play parades a gamut of expressionist devices: time dashes back and forward at will; cast and crew recline at the edge of the stage when idle; the hostess's smooth social chat is interlarded with her avaricious private thoughts in a droll parody of *Strange Interlude*'s interior monologues. Jerry Zaks's brisk direction and Tony Walton's minimalist set are at one with the script's elisions and telescopings; the production is a pleasure.

After Paul's irruption, an inconclusive rush of events flings forward such sketchy characters as: more society victims; the petulant, tantrum-addicted college kids (a welcome touch, this); their homosexual classmate who had "discovered" Paul and, as a sexual bribe, schooled him in the relevant protocols of social climbing; and, most importantly, a poor naïf would-be actor from Utah whom Paul, now living in Central Park and claiming to be Flan's son, befriends, robs, sodomizes, and drives to suicide. It is to Mr. Guare's credit that he dilutes the glamour of Paul with this cruel and in no conceivable sense "politically correct" behavior. But to complicate Paul is not to resolve the play's unfaced problems, as we see in the long last scene consisting largely of a phone call from Paul to Ouisa. She pleads with her former guest to clear up his legal problems and then more or less allow himself to be adopted, for "we love you." The pasta evening was "magical," an "experience"; even Paul's sexual behavior constituted a valid critique of the joylessness in her life. She is profoundly touched by Paul's desire to enter into "this petty thing, our life." She ends fearing he will hang himself on Riker's Island with a pink shirt. The dazzling Stockard Channing has brought to the character the full armory of an assured American high-comedy style, seguéing deftly from salon wisecracks about "striking" (in the *Vogue* sense) coal miners and "cruelty-free cosmetics" to the woman's sad spots; but we remain unconvinced that *this* woman would be brought to an examination of conscience, to an agenbite of inwit, to saying to herself in Rilke's words, "You must change your life," by *this* particular sleazy smoothie.

Part of the problem is the nature of what Ouisa and Flan have to feel so guilty about. It's dat ole debbil greed. They are clearly intended to personify the quantification of art, the ordure of trade encroaching upon the temple of the Muses. On greed, I can do no better than cite John Vincent in a recent *TLS*: "[W]hat is greed? Greed is what others pay for themselves; *my* wants, on the other hand, are needs, parts of a 'wider social concern,' otherwise known as something for nothing . . . . The cry of greed is little more than an excuse for not thinking; hence its effectiveness." Mr. Guare has, alas, in just this way let that overworked drudge greed do too much unpaid labor for him. It is revealing to contrast the victims of the real hoaxer, very icons of the liberal culture, with Ouisa, Flan, and their pigeon from the Rand. Life disdained to obey the radical script; that has been fixed.

But if the victims are straw (or at least strawish), Paul is a fatally ambiguous challenger, despite James McDaniel's shaded and touching performance. What is the point of his being black? Nothing, for he himself wants avidly to assimilate to his hosts—never, for instance, confronting the South African. What is the point of his homosexuality? Only, it seems, flagrantly to facilitate his self-destruction and his destruction of another. But this judgment is never discussed; it is left to be inferred. And it rings untrue to me that such types would need a Paul to slake their thirst for celebrity by casting them as extras in his "father's" movie of *Cats*. Paul is inept as an intruder, opaque as a person, and inarticulate as a critic. Mr. Guare has done too little reworking and rethinking of his raw material.

Mr. Guare's difficulties here recall earlier and not wholly dissimilar intruder-into-society comedies like Philip Barry's 1929 *Holiday* and S. N. Behrman's 1936 *End of Summer*. In *Holiday* the rich Setons ("Money is our god here") are challenged by mildly unsettling Johnny Case, who wishes, after marrying a Seton daughter, to take a

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few years off from business to be "free." Harrumphs father Seton: "I consider his whole attitude deliberately un-American." But the rebel daughter sides with Johnny: "He can't quite believe that a life devoted to piling up money is all it's cracked up to be. That's strange isn't it—when he has us, right before his eyes, for such a shining example?" What works in Barry comes from his real familiarity with the real rich. What's hopeless is the powder-puff vagueness of Johnny Case's assault upon their values. In *End of Summer* Behrman shows us "the verandah-living room of the Frothingham estate, Bay Cottage, in Northern Maine" invaded by an ornery young leftist (1936, don't forget) hot to found a magazine that might become "a forum for intercollegiate thought . . . the organ of critical youth as opposed to the R.O.T.C., the Vigilantes and the Fascists." Society dame Leonie Frothingham, an ancestress of Ouisa, comes to hate her own money: "It's worked against me. It gives you the illusion of escape—but always you have to come back to yourself. At the end of every journey—you find yourself." Behrman's play is inert and absurd, but it did manifest the danger, not avoided fifty-four years later by the much more intelligent Mr. Guare, of a petty, irrelevant, or incredible antagonist to wealth. (I note in passing that Leonie Frothingham was played by Ina Claire, whose sophisticated artistry, by all descriptions, was much like Stockard Channing's today.)

The most powerful and thorough drama about the assault of a transvaluing intruder upon a closed society remains Euripides' *Bacchae*. Euripides, of course, had the inestimable advantage of having as his uninvited guest the truly dangerous god Dionysus.

Jules Feiffer's latest play, *Elliot Loves*, which ran recently at the Promenade Theatre, was directed by Mike Nichols. These two first collaborated in the theater almost thirty years ago. According to the program, Feiffer's "first work for the theatre, *The Explainers*, a revue based on his cartoons, opened Playwrights at Second City in Chicago in 1961. Later that year, Mike Nichols, in his American directorial debut, directed a revised version called *The World of Jules Feiffer* in summer stock." And there was and is a palpable community of sensibility between the two men. There is a certain 1950s tonality that comes at once to mind when one thinks of the great old Nichols-and-May routines and of the early Feiffer cartoons in the *Voice*: urban, Jewish, smart, Freudian, mother-fixated, relationship-thwarted, sexually frustrated, self-dramatizing, puckishly liberal, alienated . . . and funny. They were the imps of the Eisenhower years (falsely defamed, but that's another story . . .). When the social consensus cracked in the 1960s, so did the critical voices of Nichols and May and Feiffer. The 1950s remain their golden years, ironically. In 1971, Feiffer wrote and Nichols directed the film *Carnal Knowledge*, a sour jeremiad about two guys who never, from college to the edge of male menopause, get the hang of women. *Plus ça change.* Welcome to *Elliot Loves*. It opens with a long monologue by Elliot, a Chicago gentile in his thirties who has found the perfect woman in the person of a divorced, mother-of-two real-estate broker who likes him. But . . . Elliot cannot cope with his happiness, cannot relate, cannot commit, cannot . . . love! So he whines a lot: "Look, I know I'm not unique in bed; mostly I try to please, and that's still a mystery to me. I mean I've read all the books . . . . I have to admit I liked it better when it was repressed . . . . I don't mean that AIDS is God's judgment. It's more my mother's judgment . . . . I don't have women friends. Never have. I was taught that women wouldn't go to bed with men who were friends." He fixates on his lover's nervous use of the phrase "piece of cake" and vows to marry her if only she'll stop using it.

So we see little has changed in Feiffer/Nichols land from the late 1950s. Same anxieties; same obsessions; same defensive humorous strategies. (The sole new note is false. AIDS does not fit well into a dominant-

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mother joke.) It's comforting to sit through *Elliot Loves*; it's like picking up a childhood classic—say, *Little Women*—and relishing its eternal innocence. The play develops little beyond the initial monologue. Elliot gets together with his best buddies: a black *Playboy* editor; an alcoholic who dreams of drinking with the great ("Can you imagine me peeing off a balcony with JFK? Teddy maybe, not Jack. Jack was a classy drunk. I'm more like Teddy."); an embittered divorcé who now prefers his VCR to women ("The VCR is better. A chicken-and-pasta takeout. I open a brew, I rack up the VCR. No regrets, no recriminations, no consequences."). This is funny stuff, but it amounts, formally, to little more than a string of stand-up turns. Wisps of plot drift about the evening: Will the guys call hookers? Will Joanna, Elliot's lover, show up to meet the guys? But the play soon reverts to a more comfortable format in the final scene, which consists of a long telephone call between Elliot and Joanna. (Another phone call as dramatic closure. Symbol of alienation or of lazy dramaturgy? When Forster urged that we "only connect," he wasn't thinking of AT&T. The telephone is a hackneyed and sentimental device fit for melodrama or melodrama-mocking farce. Let serious playwrights imagine bolder stage images, better objective correlatives, for what they have in mind.) After much anguishing, Elliot sort of says he loves Joanna, and she sort of doesn't say anything. It is not a scene, exactly; it's an emotional situation. And the emotions on display are almost exclusively Elliot's; Joanna is a remote character, held by the author at a respectful (ignorant?) distance. Joanna is, though, considerably enlivened by the warm, fluid grace of Christine Baranski's playing, just as Anthony Heald's earnest decency saves Elliot from the worst of the writing's whining.

A bad habit of Feiffer's, and of much recent writing in all fields, is characterization by brand name. In an early Feiffer play, a woman prated endlessly about New York stores. Here people refer to other plays to define themselves: the black man describes his relationship to his father by mentioning *Fences*; Joanna contrasts herself to the real-estate salesmen in *Glengarry Glen Ross*. These tics are a shortcut to characterization, and a shortcut that quickly dates.

Mr. Nichols as director is a master at inducing the dappled play of emotions upon the waters of his actors. We feel the currents of humor, of anxiety, of anger like sheet lightning across his stages. But he needs a fully written, a roundedly good play to operate with. One remembers what he did in 1984 with Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing*, which was a rich and adult dramatization of the very complexities and seeming impossibilities of love that stay so undramatized here.

Publisher's note: Back issues of *The New Criterion* are for sale at $5.00 each. A list of highlights is available upon request from the Office Manager.

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Books

The philosophical hedonist: Arthur C. Danto on art

by Roger Scruton

It is rare for an analytical philosopher to become a real force in the cultural life of his country. On the whole our academic sages write excruciating prose about matters of no conceivable relevance to the life of the spirit. And when, as occasionally happens, they discover that there is more meaning in a Beethoven quartet or a Poussin landscape than in the entire corpus of literature devoted to the truth-conditions of "Snow is white," they write about that too in their desolating idiom, eager to close the one known exit from their tomb.

Arthur Danto is, therefore, a remarkable man. He is a skilled philosopher, able to write of the most abstruse questions with wit and charm. His mind is fertile not only in arguments but also (rare combination) in metaphors and images. And when he looks at the world, he sees it as it really seems, and transcribes its semblance in luminous words. His new collection of essays, *Encounters and Reflections*, shows him to be a talented art critic; it also presents a distinctive voice in American culture.[1] Whether you agree with him or not, he is always instructive and usually a pleasure to read. He also has the rare gift of literary taste, knowing exactly how to suggest more than he says, while ensuring that what he suggests endorses what he says and also enlarges it. Here is the beginning of a splendidly succinct essay on Courbet:

> The glens and glades of Gustave Courbet are afflicted with an aggravated nymphlessness. His rocks and rills are goddess-free. No angels hover by when honest folk are buried at Ornan. "I am above all a total realist," he confesses on one of many proclamatory occasions.

Only "nymphlessness" lets slip that the writer was brought up on Quine. Carrying his considerable scholarship as lightly as a Japanese princess wears a two-stone kimono, Danto sweeps across the style and mind of Courbet, gives you the entire artist in half a dozen pages, and leaves you impatient to get to the show.

Most of the essays reprinted in *Encounters and Reflections* originated as exhibition reviews. For Danto, an exhibition is a serious event, like a religious festival, a time of study and reflection, an occasion to consult the authorities and attend to the soul. His reviews are therefore also surveys of their subject. He attempts to place an artist in context, and to persuade the reader that the objects on the museum wall are really as interesting as Danto finds them to be. Nor is he the only American to take exhibitions so seriously: a whole culture has grown around the ceremonial display of art. One by one the great artists of the past—and the famous artists of the present—do the rounds of the American galleries, appearing like visiting

1 *Encounters and Reflections: Art in the Historical Present*, by Arthur C. Danto; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 356 pages, $22.95.

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royalty with their court of sycophants, and for a few weeks occupying every available space in the crowded public conscience. It is for this reason that a book of reviews can also be, like Danto's, a window onto the world of painting.

Danto's judgments are far from unerring. He has his fads and protégés like David Sawin, and his phobias like *The New Criterion* and its editor; he is over-*engagé* in the cause of the American moderns, and coarse and offensive when he catches a whiff (in Anselm Kiefer) of the *Volksgeist*. But the most important pieces consist of eloquent reflections on the indisputably great: on Sargent, Van Gogh, Kokoschka, Klee, Correggio, Gauguin, Raphael, and Fragonard (concerning whom he made me think entirely anew). There is a splendid essay on Sienese painting, and an interesting attempt, lightly sketched in several places, to bring a new periodization into the history of Western art. For such reasons, the book will surely be regarded as an important expression of East Coast culture in the Eighties.

Danto is a hedonist in the mold of Pater and Wallace Stevens. Experience, as he presents it, is for relishing, not judging. His values easily consort with his love of pleasure. Although he makes considerable room for the kind of art which he calls "disturbatory," he would hate his readers to regard this term as expressing disapproval or to believe that disturbance is not to be savored like everything else.

However, every hedonist encounters the problem of other people's pleasures. Am I obliged to approve of the things which disgust me, because others delight in them? When pleasure becomes a political issue, the paid-up hedonist is duty bound to go along with the "oppressed" group: what they like, he likes. Or if he doesn't, he must at least make a show of doing so, and cancel any implication that the things he is trying to like are really disgusting. The problem comes to the fore with the homosexual photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe. These, having become a "political issue" at the time Danto wrote about them, posed a certain challenge to his style. For if Danto's writing is gay, it is only so in the good old English sense of the word. Like many American aesthetes, he is frightfully grown up about sex, and can describe a set of genitals as beefily as the next man. But he cannot, for the life of him, reproduce that dark intimacy with his own body which lies at the heart of the homosexual experience. Hence, following his normal practice of vivid description, he writes of Mapplethorpe's photographs in such a way as to establish beyond doubt that they are utterly obscene. Of course, it would violate every liberal propriety to say so. Nevertheless, the judgment haunts the page that refuses to make it, and makes you wonder what Danto is up to when, having pussyfooted around the problem of AIDS, he concludes in a hushed whisper:

> The afternoon I visited the Mapplethorpe exhibition, I was impressed by my fellow visitors. They were subdued and almost, I felt, stunned. There were no giggles, scarcely any whispers. It was as though everyone felt the moral weight of the issues. And one felt an almost palpable resistance to face the thoughts the show generated, which each visitor had to overcome. It is not an easy experience, but it is a crucial one. Art is more than just art, and the Whitney took on a higher responsibility in supporting this exhibition.

What are we to make of that? What is causing Danto to waft off the page with his head in the air and a cork up his arse? It must be the "moral weight" of the "issues." Should we include among them homosexuality, promiscuity, and the liberal morality which led to this disaster, and which tries to see nothing wrong with obscene photographs of men canceled by their sex? (Imagine if the subjects had been women, displayed to the eyes of greedy men: what would the feminists have said?)

I suppose you can't blame Danto for being no more explicit than he is. If he wrote of these matters in any way that challenged the liberal consensus he would find himself out

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of a job—not only as art critic for *The Nation*, but also as professor at Columbia. His stopping short as he does is precisely what makes him an authentic voice of East Coast culture. Nevertheless, this is not the only essay in which I felt that he was being less than honest—that he was, as it were, gritting his teeth in the cause of pleasure, and trying to silence the knowledge that there are pleasures it is better not to have. Faced with the Whitney Biennial of 1987 he is almost prepared to say that the bulk of it is rubbish, but he stops irritatingly short of doing so. Elsewhere Danto indicates that he is secretly aware that the American art world abounds in frauds and psychopaths. But again, he draws back from the judgment. He is also careful not to blame the critics who, taking their cue from Clement Greenberg, have cornered their protégés and bumped up the sales. If he has any harsh words it is for the "frenzied rich" who he imagines to be crowding the museums out of the market. But it does not occur to him that the museums are the richest and most frenzied of all. Not only do their curators spend other people's money; they are also committed to promoting the view that everything they buy is worth what they paid for it. This, working on the awe with which educated Americans view museums, is the best guarantee that art works exchange at ever higher prices.

In fact, Danto is very much at home in MOMA's world, and willing stepfather to her fleeting favorites. He is proof that a man can be truly intelligent and still believe in Andy Warhol. His eloquent essays did nothing to persuade me that Warhol was other than a monstrous fraud. Nevertheless, it caused me to wonder about the roots of Danto's criticism. How is it that a man who responds sensitively to what is truly great, can make such a show of relishing a Brillo box? What kind of philosophy is it that leads him to believe that this pretentious little joke can be discussed in the same tone of voice as Duccio, and that there is a "message" contained in the Brillo box that may be reverently set beside the message of the Rondini Pietà? (The message being, roughly, "Hey, I like it here," which Michelangelo clearly did not, for all that he found it agonizingly beautiful.)

In the three interesting theoretical essays that conclude the book, Danto addresses himself to such questions. To understand these essays, you need to go back to his philosophical aesthetics, and in particular to *The Transfiguation of the Commonplace* (1981). Like many works of American aesthetics, this centers on the question "what is art?"—a question prompted by an earlier and even sillier joke of Marcel Duchamp's. With consummate skill and wit Danto dances around the question until the reader is thoroughly dizzy and prepared to accept almost any answer (and also no answer) just so long as the philosopher will stop. He does stop—for he is an expert judge of cadences—and you are none the wiser.

Danto makes much of the puzzle that two works of art may be indistinguishable and yet distinct. But there is less to this puzzle than meets the eye, and it has nothing in particular to do with aesthetics. A paperweight may exactly resemble an ashtray: what makes it a paperweight is its use. The same is true of every artifact: its nature and identity is determined only when we understand how to use it. Works of art too are artifacts. To ask what they are is therefore to ask how we use them. The simple answer is that they are "used aesthetically." And the real puzzle is this: art is designed for a purpose, namely to be an object of aesthetic interest; but aesthetic interest involves seeing an art work as though it had no purpose but itself. If Danto never gets to this puzzle, it is because he stays fixated on *paintings* and overlooks the state of mind with which we perceive them. Hence, despite his philosophical expertise, which ought to have made him a world expert on the question "what is art?," he is unable to tell us what should hang in our museums.

This deficiency is illustrated in his essay "Masterpiece and the Museum." This arose out of a conference in which the art establishment and its "conservative" critics debated

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the question of the museum. Should museums aim to get hold of "masterpieces," whose value lies in their lasting place in the culture which produced them, or should they be conscripted to fashionable causes, and their wall-space filled with agitprop? (I admit that's not a neutral way of posing the question—but you see what I mean.)

The conflict, then, is between a traditional view which maintains the reality of aesthetic values, and a radical view which places political relevance in the place of aesthetic merit. The new criterion of museum membership is phrased in political terms: does the work make a "political point," and one that we approve of? In particular, does it constitute a "challenge" to the heterosexist, racist, and patriarchal culture which has hitherto "controlled" the museums? If the result of adopting such a criterion is that the museum is stuffed full of posturing trivia, with a boredom quotient equal to the record levels established by American feminism, then so be it. After all—and Danto cheerfully accepts the possibility—we may be living through "the end of art," a period when artifacts which once were treated as objects of aesthetic veneration have acquired a wholly novel use—not exactly to *épater les bourgeois* (who are no longer *épatables*, consisting as they do largely of Dantos) but at least to "challenge" the "structures" of etc., etc.

Discussing this issue, Danto argues that

> the museum is, to use an expression widely borrowed from Jacques Derrida, "always already" political in its very inception. The struggle that gave a certain shape to the conference on the masterpiece was not between the political and the nonpolitical, but between two political positions, one held so long that it had until recently forgotten or suppressed the consciousness of how political it was.

Now the East Coast is a peculiar place, and a lot of things which "go without saying" in its electric atmosphere can be repeated elsewhere only at the risk of sounding rather cute. Nevertheless, it has to be assumed that in a place where Warhol can be seriously considered to be a touchstone of artistic value, Derrida might also carry some weight in philosophical discussion. This does not prevent me from reacting with shock when an analytical philosopher adopts the rhetorical manner of a Parisian *gauchiste*. Haven't we seen through all that stuff—that "diagnostic" way of argument which floats around in Foucault and his followers, which pollutes the mainstream of sociology, and against which, one might have thought, a philosopher would have long since been inoculated by his training (it is, after all, just about the only benefit that his training can confer)? Or are we to accept that, whenever we oppose the politicization of something (be it art or sport or hiking or religion) we are "merely" taking another (and of course necessarily conservative) political position, and that every institution, from the tennis court to the tea table, is "always already" political? Here, surely, is where the analytical philosopher should roll up his sleeves and get down to it. So here goes.

Among the many interesting mathematicians, there are at least two kinds: those who discover proofs, explain them lucidly, and advance the sum of mathematical knowledge; and those who develop a "mathematics of protest," devoting their writings and their classes to the promotion of radical causes, and prepared, if need be, to prove that 2 +2 = 5 when the Sandinistas, the gays, or the feminists stand in need of it. Which of them should we appoint to our chairs of mathematics? When the "conservative" says that the appointment of the second type of mathematician is political, he means that it is *only* political, and nothing else. But now comes the *gauchisant* response: so too is the traditional alternative! To appoint mathematicians on the basis of their mathematical competence, as defined by the existing structures, is "merely" to endorse the existing structures, and our inherited mathematical culture, with all its hidden racist, sexist, patriarchal, etc., etc. What a yawn!

It is of course a political choice to teach mathematics in our universities, rather than

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to replace it by political attitudinizing. But it is not *merely* a political choice. Mathematics stands above and beyond politics, and can only be damaged by the attempt to endow it with a political profile. If you choose to teach mathematics, then you must appoint the person who is good at it, regardless of his political views. Chomsky did not get to the summit of his discipline by espousing left-wing causes, any more than Quine got there by being a conservative. (If you *can* get to the summit of a discipline—"women's studies," for instance—on the strength of your political profile, that is because there is no such discipline.) In short, mathematics has its own criteria of value, and these have nothing to do with politics.

Furthermore, there is a reason to teach mathematics which lies above politics: namely, that mathematical knowledge is part of what the Greeks called "the good for man": in whatever circumstances, under whatever political regimen, it is better to know these truths than to ignore them.

The argument about the museums runs parallel. The "conservative" defends the old conception because he believes that there are aesthetic values, and that it is part of the "good for man" to be acquainted with them. And once you choose to pursue aesthetic values, it is they that prevail, regardless of the politics. Moreover, aesthetic values, like mathematical truths, have a way of siding with no one in the political fray. Picasso isn't hung in our museums because of his Communist commitments, nor do those commitments show clearly in his greatest paintings. And when art lapses into propaganda, it doesn't last long on the walls. (Consider the fate of Socialist Realism.)

Danto makes it clear that he doesn't like conservatives. Having perceived that Aristophanes was one, he decides that he doesn't like *him* either. But it was Aristophanes who saw that philosophers are among the worst judges of human nature. Sophistication in argument is too tempting a substitute for knowledge of the heart, and it is knowledge of the heart which is most evidently missing from Danto's more reflective essays. Art matters far more than the fleeting fads of the liberal conscience; think hard about the *Oresteia*, *Troilus and Cressida*, or Poussin's *Rape of the Sabine Women* and you will see how gross are the terms which are flung at each other by the feminists and those who offend them, and how deep and ambiguous is the human reality which they abuse. It is because they open onto these deeper regions of feeling that aesthetic values are important. Yet the values of the hedonist point always in a contrary direction, toward a blithe acceptance, a refusal to judge, which is also a refusal to feel.

Danto would not regard that as a criticism: his carapace of sophistication is not so easily breached. Besides, he will argue, who are you to tell me what aesthetic values are? On whom lies the burden of proof? It is partly because he must be encountered at this abstract level that Danto is interesting. His hostility to *The New Criterion* should not deter readers of that journal from his book. His essays are only occasionally ideological, and only fleetingly combative. For the most part they are true expressions of the writer's joy in art; and one should be thankful for a writer who is more eager to praise than to condemn, and who can always find a sparkling phrase for doing so.

Epaulets & decorations

Anthony Hecht Collected Earlier Poems. Knopf, 272 pages, $22.95
The Transparent Man. Knopf, 75 pages, $18.95

reviewed by Robert Richman

Like his near-contemporary, the late Philip Larkin, Anthony Hecht has produced, since the ripening of his talent in the early Fifties, one slender volume of poems per decade: *A Summoning of Stones* (1954), *The Hard Hours* (1967), *Millions of Strange Shadows* (1977), and *The Venetian Vespers* (1979). (*The Venetian Vespers* turned out to be

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Hecht's book for the Eighties.) All the work from these books has been gathered in a moderately sized *Collected Earlier Poems* —moderately sized, that is, for a poet who is now in his seventh decade. This book is accompanied by a separate collection of new work entitled *The Transparent Man*. Judging by the rate at which Hecht has been publishing, *The Transparent Man* is likely to be Hecht's book for the Nineties.

Again like Larkin, Hecht is a meticulous writer, laboring arduously on his poems, and unusually patient when it comes to publication. But there the resemblance between the two poets more or less ends. Hecht has long been viewed as the unabashed champion of high art, writing verse in an elevated, at times archaic, language: "A little snuffbox whereon Daphnis sings, / In pale enamels, touching love's defeat." Hecht also relies on wordplay ("Whirled without end," "Our name in lights, somewhat the worse for where," etc.) and on settings and subject matter—foreign lands, works of art, the mythical past—that demand a certain level of knowledge and sophistication from the reader. In all of this, of course, Hecht differs vastly from Larkin, whose poetic province was the drab, uneventful ground of contemporary England. Indeed, to some readers, Hecht's poetical airs are seen to conceal an icy indifference to the ordinary world of which Larkin was our preeminent spokesman.

And yet, as understandable as such a perception of Hecht's poetry is, it is very far from being the whole story, which is rather more convoluted. Although Hecht does at times revel in wit, learning, and poetic elegance for their own sake, he just as often strives to modify or even criticize this aesthetic point of view. One of the most notorious of these self-critical poems is "The Dover Bitch," Hecht's parody of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach." These are some of the crucial lines in Hecht's burlesque:

> So there stood Matthew Arnold and this girl
> With the cliffs of England crumbling away
> behind them,
> And he said to her, "Try to be true to me,
> And I'll do the same for you, for things are bad
> All over, etc., etc."
> Well now, I knew this girl. It's true she had read
> Sophocles in a fairly good translation
> And caught that bitter allusion to the sea,
> But all the time he was talking she had in mind
> The notion of what his whiskers would feel like
> On the back of her neck.

The problem with Matthew Arnold, at least in the eyes of the poem's earthy speaker, is that the distinguished Victorian poet and man of letters transformed his addressee into, as the narrator later puts it in the poem, "a sort of mournful cosmic last resort." This comic reproach to Arnold is well-taken. But what needs to be understood is that Hecht's good-natured rebuke is also directed at his own literary highmindedness.

As apt as Hecht's criticism of Arnold (and his own pompous side) is, however, it would be a mistake to confuse the poem's speaker with the poet himself. The speaker of "The Dover Bitch" is impossibly vulgar: so vulgar, in fact, that he is himself a worthy object of parody: "I still see her once in a while," Hecht's emotional troglodyte says, referring to Arnold's lover, "And she always treats me right." Thus, while Hecht seems eager to point up the limitations of Arnold's attitude—limitations that resemble Hecht's own—he is also eager to show that the figure he has chosen to puncture such poetic pretensions is not to be regarded as a repository of truth, either.

This double-edged poetic strategy is also at work in the poems Hecht devotes to suffering and brutality—particularly "Behold the Lilies of the Field" and "'More Light! More Light!'" The latter recounts the order to a Pole by a German officer to bury alive two Jews; after the Pole refuses to do as he is charged, he is ordered to change places with the Jews. The same strategy is evident in "The Deodand," which takes as its ostensible subject Pierre-Auguste Renoir's painting *Parisians Dressed in Algerian Costume*. "The Deodand" begins with a daz-

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zling description of the women in the painting by a speaker who is more than a little preoccupied with the suggestiveness of the women's appropriated attire: "Swathed in exotic finery, in loose silks,/Gauzy organzas with metallic threads,/Intricate Arab vests, brass ornaments/At wrist and ankle, those small sexual fetters . . ." The opening passage of "The Deodand," from which these lines are quoted, is powerfully erotic, but is also suffused with a distinct sense of the speaker's paranoia. The description culminates in a moral observation, which is followed by a denouement of the most terrible horror as the narrator shifts his focus and recounts an incident from the final months of the Algerian war:

> In the final months of the Algerian war
> They captured a very young French Legionnaire.
> They shaved his head, decked him in a blonde wig,
> Carmined his lips grotesquely, fitted him out
> With long, theatrical false eyelashes
> And a bright, loose-fitting skirt of calico,
> And cut off all the fingers of both hands.
> He had to eat from a fork held by his captors.

The narrator's point is clear enough: if you cavort erotically in the costume of your colonized poor—one of those Parisian women, the speaker tells us, was "playing the slave-artisan's role"—you had better be prepared, at a later stage of history, for a squaring of accounts. And this, of course, is precisely what happens, as the twentieth-century Algerian soldiers avenge the ninety-year-old misdeed on the hapless French Legionnaire. "Those who will not be taught by history," Hecht's moralizing speaker tells us, echoing Santayana, "Have as their curse the office to repeat it . . ."

But it is not just Renoir's suggestively arrayed women who "will not be taught by history." Hecht himself, and by extension all artists who pursue beauty, are guilty of the charge of reveling in tainted "allurements" and "treasures" of their own. Poets especially, much like Renoir's decked-out Parisian women, can fall prey to the sort of disabling inattentiveness to history that Hecht's narrator is so worked up about. Like "The Dover Bitch," then, "The Deodand" gives Hecht the opportunity to examine —rather pitilessly, one might add—a central aspect of his own work as a poet.

Yet the question must be asked: how much of a correlation is there, after all, between the flawed but largely innocent behavior of the nineteenth-century Parisian women that Renoir painted—or of Renoir himself—and the out-and-out butchery of the Algerians? Very little. And because there is little equity in the Algerians' barbaric "response" to the "crime" of historical inattention, we are obliged—as we were obliged with "The Dover Bitch"—to ask ourselves exactly who Hecht's speaker is, what his own motives and disabilities may be. And in "The Deodand," the narrator is so insanely set on retribution that we are compelled to question the validity of his appeal.

Does Hecht wish to retract the proposition that, in pursuing beauty, poets tend to disregard history's horrors? This doesn't appear to be the case. But if Hecht doesn't wish to retract his point, one can't help but wonder about the poetic efficacy of evoking all those abominations in the first place. The atrocities that Hecht writes about—and they are of a sort that no other contemporary poet will engage—may be too heinous, finally, for the aesthetic style of the poetry to bear. In Hecht's poetry, one all too often observes this easy moralizing about history, a moralizing that costs the poet nothing.

The Transparent Man—which includes fine elegies to the poets L. E. Sissman and James Wright, and to the critic David Kalstone—shows Hecht as obsessed as ever by the potential deceptions of beauty and art. Indeed, in the narrative poem entitled "See Naples and Die," beauty is personified by a flat-out crook. The tourist-speaker, a man on the mend from a disastrous marriage, is bilked by a Neapolitan con artist who offers him a better rate of exchange than the pre-

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vailing one. Hecht's naïve tourist is thoroughly charmed by "the skilled legerdemain of those adept,/Tapered, manicured, bejewelled hands"—only to find himself in the end defrauded by them.

In the title poem Hecht is also concerned with the deception of art. The narrator—a woman dying of cancer— writes:

> Of course I know
> That within a month the sleeving snows will come
> With cold, selective emphases, with massings
> And arbitrary contrasts, rendering things
> Deceptively simple, thickening the twigs
> To frosty veins, bestowing epaulets
> And decorations on every birch and aspen.
> And the eye, self-satisfied, will be misled,
> Thinking the puzzle solved, supposing at last
> It can look forth and comprehend the world.
> That's when you have to really watch yourself.

The suggestion, of course, is that the snow-covered trees, like art, are guilty of a kind of fraud: their "cold, selective emphases" only serve to simplify and conceal the terrible real world where cancer may strike at random.

"The Transparent Man" and "See Naples and Die" are also narrated by suspicious characters. The speaker of "See Naples and Die" is emotionally distraught, while the narrator of "The Transparent Man" is physically striken and close to death. Once again, Hecht appears to be suggesting that his chosen speakers' misgivings about art and beauty should be understood as not constituting the final word on the matter.

In "The Transparent Man" and "See Naples and Die," then, Hecht expresses an anti-art opinion only to sabotage it. Of course, these two poems do not traffic in the horrors that "The Deodand" traffics in; this makes Hecht's aesthetic manipulations more tolerable. All the same, one sometimes wishes that even in Hecht's less horror-laden poems the poet wasn't quite so maniacally obsessed with all of the reasons not to create art, especially if in the end he is going to create such art anyway. There is something in this attitude that rings false.

Hecht's poetry, which oscillates between a zealous defense of art and a relentless questioning of it, is and always has been rewarding. And yet, one can't but wonder where one may locate the real Anthony Hecht. Is the real Hecht the figure in these poems who is vulnerable to the enchantments of art, or is he the character here who—like some religious ascetic beseeching the mortals of the world to be satisfied with little and desire nothing—harbors unanswerable apprehensions about art? At times it is hard to say. The arty photograph on the jacket of *The Transparent Man*, which shows not Hecht's face but the mirrored image of his face, seems to compound the mystery—and the air of pretension—that haunts the work itself.

"But who would want to curb/Such delicious, artful flattery?" asks the poet-narrator of "The Ghost in the Martini," one of Hecht's most memorable poems. When Hecht chooses to follow *this* course, rather than that of the many invented speakers who propose that he "curb" art's "flattery," Hecht may be at his best as a poet. For only then can he, as he puts it in "Crows in Winter," be like "the wind, a voiceless thorn," which

> goes over the details,
> making a soft promise
> to take our breath away.

Shorter notices

Milton J. Bates, editor Sur Plusiers Beaux Sujects: Wallace Stevens' Commonplace Book. Stanford University Press/ Huntington Library, 117 pages, $19.95

Most writers scribble notes to themselves, often on scraps of paper or on the backs of envelopes. It tells us something about the kind of man Wallace Stevens was that he organized *his* notes into several discrete notebooks, each with its own title, and made entries in an extremely neat hand, using a pencil so that he could erase mistakes. In a

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notebook called "Adagia," he recorded reflections, mostly in epigrammatic form, on his abiding theme, the relation of reality and imagination: "Poetry and materia poetica are interchangeable terms." "We live in the mind." "The poet is the priest of the invisible." In "From Pieces of Paper" and "Schemata," he jotted down images, title ideas, and the like: "Cats & Marigolds." "A poem like a season of the mind." "Asides on the Oboe." Last of all—and probably least—he kept a two-volume commonplace book, its entries dating from 1932 to the early Fifties (he died in 1955), which contains a total of 104 items, most of them quotations. The collective title of these two notebooks, *Sur Plusiers Beaux Sujects* ("on several beautiful subjects"), apparently derives from that of a sixteenth-century French collection of ancient Greek epigrams (*sujects* is an early spelling for *sujets*).

Now Milton J. Bates, a professor at Marquette University and the author of *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of the Self*, has turned these two slim *cahiers* into a slim, handsome book. On the versos are facsimiles of Stevens's lined gray notebook pages; facing them on the rectos are transcriptions of those pages' contents, along with assorted citations, corrections, annotations, and translations by Professor Bates. The authors quoted range from Pascal to Lionel Trilling, from Confucius to Stephen Spender, from Bertrand Russell to Jacques Maritain; Stevens cites a review of an English gardening book in *The New Statesman*, a note on Schoenberg in *The Musical Quarterly*, a note on Picasso in *Apollo*. (Indeed, readers may be surprised to find far more extracts here from book reviews—mostly British and French—and letter collections than from the classics or modernist poetry.)

Diverse though the sources may be, however, virtually all the quotations reflect, in some way, Stevens's preoccupation with truth, beauty, the character of the artist, the ordering role of the creative intellect, and the relation between everyday reality and the reality of art. This emphasis is not surprising, nor (given Stevens's Francophilia) is the fact that many of the book's pithiest lines come from Frenchmen, among them Jules Renard ("Truth is not always art; art is not always truth, but truth and art have points of contact; I look for them"), Gabriel Fauré ("The artist ought to love life and show us that it is beautiful"), and Jacques Tournier ("An authentic writer explores an authentic universe, under the guidance of an inner necessity. And that is all that counts"). A few quotations are followed by brief comments expressing Stevens's agreement, qualification, or dissent; for example, an observation by Graham Bell about Cézanne's integrity provokes Stevens's approving remark that Bell "adds to the subject and manner the thing that is incessantly overlooked: the artist, the presence of the determining personality. Without that reality no amount of other things matters much."

Only a handful of the quotations that Stevens copied into his commonplace book can be identified, with any confidence, as direct influences upon his verse. A phrase quoted from Mario Rossi appears as an epigraph to the poem "Evening without Angels." Another quotation contains the words "*le plus pur*," which Stevens later used in the poem "The Blue Buildings in the Summer Air." A remark by George Chapman to the effect that plainness in poetry represents "the plain way to barbarism" presumably inspired a line in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven": "The plainness of plain things is savagery." Slim pickings. But *Sur Plusiers Beaux Sujects* does make for interesting browsing, and it does demonstrate that Stevens's reading, in the words of Professor Bates, "nourished his lifelong thematic preoccupations."

—*Bruce Bawer*

Robert Conquest The Great Terror: A Reassessment. Oxford University Press, 570 pages, $24.95

When *The Great Terror* was first published in 1968, it immediately established itself as a classic of modern history. Never before had

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we been given so complete an account of the criminal actions taken by Stalin in the 1930s to secure his absolute rule of the Soviet Union. Mr. Conquest's detailed chronicle of the assassinations, arrests, tortures, frame-ups, forced confessions, show trials, executions, and incarcerations that destroyed millions of lives and held an entire society in a state of abject fear and servitude was all the more impressive because of the need, at that time, to rely so largely on what the author calls "unofficial material." "As with the writing of ancient history," he remarks in the preface of this new edition of *The Great Terror*, "it was a matter of balancing and assessing incomplete, partial, and uneven material—and not, as with the writing of modern Western history, the deployment, in addition to these, of adequate and credible official archives." The result was a triumph of historical analysis.

The Great Terror was, moreover, a unique book at the time of its initial publication, and remains so today. As Mr. Conquest notes with justifiable pride in this new edition:

> During the years since [its first publication], *The Great Terror* remained the only full historical account of the period—as, indeed, it does to this day. It was received as such not only in the West but also in most circles in the Soviet Union. I seldom met a Soviet official or academic (or émigré) who had not read it in English, or in a Russian edition published in Florence, or in *semizdat;* nor did any of them question its general accuracy, even if able to correct or amend a few details.

Last year the book was hailed in *Moscow News* as "one of the most significant of foreign researches into Soviet history," and was serialized in the literary-critical periodical *Neva*.

It is owing to the advent of glasnost, of course, that such open publication has been possible in the Soviet Union. And it is owing to this momentous change that much new information on the Terror has come to light—information that has now been incorporated into this expanded version of *The Great Terror*. "Fearful stories of labor-camp life, of torture, of denunciation and falsification have appeared," Mr. Conquest writes in an epilogue. "And, just as important, massive confirmation of the huge impact of the Terror and of the numbers of dead, deported, and imprisoned have been made public."

According to Mr. Conquest's original estimates approximately seven million people were arrested in 1937-1938. About one million were executed, and another two million died in the camps. By late 1938, about eight million people were held in the vilest forms of captivity. All of these grim figures have now had to be increased as the result of new information. *The Great Terror* was never a book for the squeamish. Certain pages devoted to episodes of torture and other forms of violence are so stomach-turning that one has to look away from the text to recover one's ability to read on, into the details of yet further horrors. Yet this is one of the books that is essential reading for anyone who attempts to comprehend the terrible history of this century.

—*Hilton Kramer*

Nathan Milstein and Solomon Volkov From Russia to the West: The Musical Memoirs and Reminiscences of Nathan Milstein. Translated from the Russian by Antonina W. Bouis. Holt, 282 pages, $24.95

Now eighty-five years old and in retirement, the Russian-born violinist Nathan Milstein has enjoyed an important career extending over sixty years and more. Living in the West during this time, he achieved a rank just below such princes of the instrument as Fritz Kreisler and Jascha Heifetz. Now, his playing career over, he is presenting us with his recollections of a very busy life. One must assume that he is no writer, for in his memoirs he has been assisted by Solomon Volkov, a Soviet émigré best known in the West for bringing out *Testimony*, the memoirs of the great Russian com-

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poser Dmitri Shostakovich. In the case of the Shostakovich memoirs, Mr. Volkov performed his task of midwife after the composer's death; the fruits of this unorthodox collaboration, though clearly true in the largest sense, did present the reader with a problem of separating the voice of Mr. Volkov from the voice of Shostakovich. Not surprisingly, this problem exists for the reader of Mr. Milstein's recollections as well.

The Shostakovich memoirs, of course, dealt with the twentieth-century relationship between totalitarian politics and the resulting human and artistic tragedies. By contrast, the Milstein memoirs are a chatty collection of happy personal anecdotes and of musical judgments, mostly routine, but often sharply critical and sometimes merely curious. Among the more curious judgments is Mr. Milstein's rejection of the Brahms Violin Concerto as a great work; furthermore, he abhors all the music of Igor Stravinsky written after *The Rite of Spring*; he includes under his ban all the music of Arnold Schoenberg, including *Verklaerte Nacht*, a masterpiece he calls "saccharine Wagner." Rather more predictably, Mr. Milstein's routine judgments include warm admiration for the Lalo *Symphonie Espagnole*, and the Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and Tchaikowsky violin concertos.

It was Mr. Milstein's good fortune to witness the great period of theatrical experimentation, associated with the names of Tairov, Meyerhold, and Vakhtangov, in the first few years of post-revolutionary Moscow. It was also his good fortune to be associated, then and later, with such great composers as Alexander Glazunov and Sergei Rachmaninov, and with such great instrumentalists as cellist Gregor Piatigorsky and pianist Vladimir Horowitz. Though he is unfairly dismissive of Glazunov, he was an admirer of Rachmaninov and his music, and he collaborated in well-received performances with Piatigorsky and Horowitz. Mr. Milstein knew and worked with conductor Arturo Toscanini, and seems to have had a happy personal relationship with that difficult man. But despite the intrinsic interest of his material, the sad truth is that whatever the importance of the phenomena he witnessed, Mr. Milstein has little of interest to say.

Still worse, the Milstein book (or rather, the Milstein-Volkov book) is one of the sloppiest of its kind to appear in recent years. It is so error-ridden that a prudent reader might be forgiven for refusing to accept anything in it. The errors contained in this book are not simply minor mistakes of detail. All too often they involve constituent elements upon which an entire story turns. Thus the book has Mr. Milstein, Rachmaninov, and Horowitz critically discussing not one but *two* Horowitz recordings of the Tchaikowsky Piano Concerto. Alas, the second Horowitz recording was not released until 1959, and the performance on which it was based took place on April 25, 1943, some twenty-eight days *after* Rachmaninov's death. Similarly, a Milstein anecdote about playing the Mendelssohn concerto for Toscanini prior to a 1936 concert makes the point that the violinist, in order to receive the maestro's musical wisdom, gave up a chance to see Danny Kaye perform in the Moss Hart-Kurt Weill musical *Lady in the Dark*; the problem with this Milstein story is that *Lady in the Dark* did not see the light of Broadway until 1941.

—*Samuel Lipman*

Michael Fried Courbet's Realism. University of Chicago Press, 378 pages, $39.95

The ostensible subject of this new book is the work of the great French realist painter Gustave Courbet (1819-1877). But what Michael Fried, a much-lauded academic art historian and director of the Humanities Institute at the Johns Hopkins University, has given us is only remotely concerned with Courbet. His real subject is the perpetuation of a certain florid species of contemporary academic "criticism." Courbet appears merely as the occasion, the raw material, for the exercise of Professor Fried's critical lucubrations.

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Not that this comes as a surprise. Anyone who has followed Professor Fried's career knows that he has long since abandoned art criticism per se—criticism, that is, whose chief purpose is to understand and illuminate works of art—in order to devote his considerable talents to chic academic theory-mongering. *Courbet's Realism* is the summary of his recent efforts in this direction.

As usual, Professor Fried operates with a formidable *criticus apparatus,* and he has obviously devoted an immense labor to this study. And yet, if one didn't know better, one might think he was attempting a comic impersonation of contemporary academic pedantry. Almost a quarter of the book is given over to notes: long, arcane notes, notes that wander and digress, that include lengthy passages from Hegel and Marx and Walter Benjamin in German, from Jacques Lacan in French—notes, in short, that in many cases have absolutely nothing to do with the painting of Gustave Courbet. Near the beginning of the book, Professor Fried tells us that he is convinced that "Courbet himself was largely unaware of the aspects of his work I focus on." This is perhaps the only unexceptionable statement in the entire volume.

Savor this representative footnote: "It's tempting to compare the feminization of the phallus/paintbrush in the *Young Women on the Banks of the Seine* with the implied castration of the dead roe deer and indeed of the passive hunter in *The Quarry,* an almost exactly contemporary work. Cf. Jacques Derrida's speculations on the interplay between phallic and floral imagery in the writings of Jean Genet in *Glas, passim.*" It's no use objecting that there is neither paintbrush nor phallus in the bucolic painting of young women by the Seine; nor that *The Quarry* depicts a hunting scene, not a grotesque Freudian melodrama; nor indeed that all such speculation would be utterly anathema to the earthy, conspicuously non-metaphysical Courbet. For Professor Fried, the fact that a painting's subject is prosaic is only an added spur to his overworked faculty for fantasy.

In the end it is a macabre kind of bookish fantasy, not scholarship, not criticism, that animates *Courbet's Realism.* As such, the book is a veritable inventory of fashionable academic topics and rhetorical tics. Everything's here: a pinch of deconstruction, a large measure of sexual politics, a positive obsession with issues of power and domination, all mixed and stirred in Professor Fried's deadpan academic prose. Did you know that Courbet's realist painting was fundamentally an "allegory of its own production"? That in *A Burial at Ornans* the depicted shovel "may be likened to the painter's brush"? That Courbet had a "propensity for calling into question the ontological impermeability of the bottom framing-edge"? Would you have guessed that Courbet's realist paintings provide "an archetype of the perfect reciprocity between production and consumption that Karl Marx in the 'General Introduction' to the *Grundrisse* posited"? Or that Courbet—yes, Courbet—had latent feminist, indeed, "feminine" tendencies?

In the context of this book, mention of Marx necessarily reminds one of that sage's comment about history repeating itself first as tragedy, then farce. Which prompts the question: is it farce or tragedy that has been the "latent tendency" of Professor Fried's work all along?

—*Roger Kimball*

Karl E. Meyer, editor Pundits, Poets, and Wits: An Omnibus of American Newspaper Columns. Oxford University Press, 458 pages, $24.95

On April 2, 1722, James Franklin, publisher of *The New-England Courant,* printed in his paper an unsolicited item—a wickedly witty letter, the first in a promised series, designed to entertain (and morally instruct) the gentle citizens of Boston. It was signed "Silence Dogood," who would later describe herself to her readers as a young, handsome widow, "a great Forgiver of *private* Injuries," "an Enemy to Vice," and "a Friend to Vertue."

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"I have likewise," she continued, "a natural Inclination to observe and reprove the Faults of others, at which I have an excellent Faculty. I speak this by Way of Warning to all such whose Offences shall come under my Cognizance, for I never intend to wrap my Talent in a Napkin."

The good Mrs. Dogood was, of course, the satirical mouthpiece of Franklin's younger brother Ben; she was also the result of the boy's precocious reading of *The Spectator*, which had flourished and vanished the decade before. But the fortnightly letters of "Silence Dogood," which appeared in fourteen issues of the *Courant*, are more than just a Founding Father's inspired knock-offs of Addison and Steele; they are, according to anthologist Karl E. Meyer, the first examples of that "rude, reckless, silly, and prejudiced" native cabbage known as the American newspaper column, whose greatest practitioners, each a unique and delicate seismograph for the recording of Offences, include some of the most unwrapped Talents in all our national letters.

Mr. Meyer, a member of the *New York Times* editorial board, is a trustworthy historian of "what is at best an uneven popular art," and his lengthy, informative introduction, "The Forthright Estate," is one of his book's better features. In it he traces the evolution of the column from its origins in the English periodical essay, through its unquestioned heyday in the early 1900s, all the way down to the present age —an age that, if sadly lacking in grade 'A' columnists (George Ade, Ambrose Bierce, F.P.A.), is decidedly rich in 'B's (Bombeck, Buchwald, Barry, and Buckley). He is especially good on the column's contribution—in the work of Seba Smith (Major Downing), James Russell Lowell (Hosea Biglow), Joel Chandler Harris (Uncle Remus), and a host of others—to the vernacular style in American literature; on the *Front Page* Chicago newspaper world of Ben Hecht, Ring Lardner, and Finley Peter Dunne; and on the influence on national policy of such self-elected legislators as Walter Lippmann and Joseph and Stewart Alsop.

But the trustworthy historian is not a trustworthy anthologist. Mr. Meyer has chosen too widely—seventy-two columnists, of every political and artistic stripe, addressing two and a half centuries of American life—and has arranged his choices chronologically rather than thematically: the reader may feel he's opened—well, not a book, but a file cabinet. Also, a great many of the living contributors, and too many of the "Other Columns and Columnists" listed in the appendix, are fixtures of Mr. Meyer's *Times*, which not only smacks of favoritism but creates the false impression that few other papers still sponsor such writing. The most serious problem, however, is that in trying to serve too many columnists, Mr. Meyer serves none of them well: no writer gets more than ten pages, and many of the best get only two or three. Mr. Meyer reprints but one column by Don Marquis (Archy the cockroach's first communication, 1916) and only part of another by Milt Gross (Nize Baby's sturry from Pocahantas witt Keptain John Smeet, 1925). Good though they are, they hardly suggest the inventive range of these remarkable entertainers. Yet these few pages by Marquis and Gross, still as funny and fresh as they were when first published, amply reveal what all the best pieces in this collection do: the possibilities of the newspaper column in the hands of a master, and why, as E. B. White has put it, "buying a newspaper [was once] quietly exciting, in a way that it has ceased to be."

—Christopher Carduff

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Notebook

Walker Percy, 1916-1990

by Cleanth Brooks

Walker Percy was an excellent literary artist and a remarkable man. In his fiction he was keen and witty, and in his social criticism and satire he was brilliantly perceptive. As a man he was genial, gracious, a wonderful conversationalist, and apparently cheerfully comfortable in a world in which he was quite at home. Yet the great theme of his fiction was man's alienation from the familiar world of here and now in which we pass our daily lives.

He insisted, in essays and interviews, that he was not writing the "Southern Novel" and that he had not the slightest intention of imitating William Faulkner. Yet he greatly admired Faulkner—and we may add, for he himself added them, Eudora Welty, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, R. P. Warren, Flannery O'Connor, and other Southern writers of our century. As for being Southern himself, I can't think of anyone who knew the South better or who could more precisely set forth the people, black and white, rich and poor, in their appearance, their customs, their thinking, and their speech. Percy could faultlessly address any Southern speaker in his own proper dialect.

Percy was indeed deeply Southern, and he moved about in his chosen Southern world easily and with enjoyment. Why, then, was his basic theme man's alienation from the dominant society? Why, for example, should Will Barrett, the principal character in Percy's *The Last Gentleman*, experience his peculiar loneliness? After several years in Manhattan, Barrett comes home to his native South. But the South he came home to "was different from the South he had left. It was happy, victorious, Christian, rich, patriotic and Republican."

Percy is very emphatic in stressing this new happiness of the South. As the returning Will Barrett saw it, "The happiness of the South was very formidable. It defied you to call it anything else." It certainly defied Barrett to call it anything else. But in spite of his determination to join the home folks and be happy "and at home, too," Barrett does not succeed. He remained an alienated man.

Though he came of planter stock, and was reared by a foster father, William Alexander Percy, who was a man of letters, Percy chose to major in chemistry and to go on to the Columbia University Medical School. He received his M.D. in due course and was serving as an intern at Bellevue in New York City when he contracted tuberculosis while doing an autopsy. So his planned career as a physician came, in fact, to an end before it had really begun: it was only then that he seriously engaged himself in a career as a writer.

Percy's knowledge of science was to be of great importance to him as he set out to write about the new South still full of its old customs and ideas but eager to embrace the new technological society which had made the rest of America rich. A firm grasp of the proper domain of scientific work, its methods of verification, and its limitations as an

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oracle dispensing truth, was useful to a writer who had been a serious reader of thinkers like Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Camus and had become a convert to Catholicism. In an age of general confusion such as ours is, the man who has a definite position and knows how to defend it, speaks with authority. This is especially true when such a man is also an accomplished artist and has a natural command of the language.

Percy's first novel, *The Moviegoer* (1961), attracted serious attention at once. Yet being a Southerner as well as being a Catholic has its liabilities. He was thoroughly aware of this fact. He entitled a lecture published in 1982 "How to Be an American Novelist in Spite of Being Southern and Catholic." He specifies there the difficulties. But the situation was not hopeless and indeed there were actual positive advantages. One great advantage, Percy tells us, is "that the Southerner can see the American scene from both the inside and the outside—inside because living as he does in the resurgent Sunbelt, he is more American than ever; from the outside because he's still Southern whether he likes it or not, which is to say he can still see the American proposition from a tragic historical perspective. He knows in his bones that things can come to grief and probably will. And whether he is a believer or not, he is also more likely to know that Man is tragically flawed and is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward."

This is a very acute observation and applies to many other Southern writers, but the form of the statement is pure Walker Percy. He has here got down clearly the character of his vision of America. The way in which he describes it is characteristic of his own personality.

Problems of all sorts do exist for the Southern writer and the Catholic writer, problems that cannot be simply brushed aside. For example, the Sunbelt, Percy remarks, is now "informed . . . by a species of triumphant Christendom." In this Sunbelt Christendom, there has been a "devaluation of the Christian vocabulary. . . . The old words, God, grace, sin, redemption . . . now tend to be rather exhausted, worn slick as poker chips and signifying as little, or else are heard as the almost random noise of radio and TV preachers." Percy goes on to point out that the grim roadside signs of the "Christendom of the Old South, such as 'Prepare to Meet Eternity,' served the novelist's purposes better than Oral Roberts' cheerful announcements that Something Good is Going to Happen to You."

How does Percy treat his alienated characters in his novels? Do they emerge from their alienation triumphantly? Do they enter the Catholic Church? Only one of Percy's main characters, Dr. Tom More, who appears in two of his novels, is a Roman Catholic, and More frankly calls himself a "bad Catholic." Binx Bolling, Will Barrett (who like More appears in two of the novels), and Lancelot Andrewes Lamar are not believers at all. "Seekers" would be a more accurate term for them. Something significant, even transformative, does happen to all of these alienated men. But what happens occurs so quietly that its full significance is sometimes missed by even a sensitive reader. I recently received a letter in which a reader reported to me that the ending of one of Percy's novels had left her quite puzzled. Why did this able novelist seem to play down so much the ultimate recoveries and resolutions of problems —that is, if these recoveries and resolutions did, in fact, occur?

The simplest answer is that Walker Percy was a novelist and that as a novelist he had special problems in presenting his truths. He remarks in one of his lectures that "The South has been called a Jesus haunted country. A believer would not want to escape His haunting presence. There are two things Southern writers have always been stuck with, blacks and Jesus." But Percy goes on to observe that if the writer is a believer, he is also in trouble. "He finds himself in bed with the wrong bedfellows."

One can easily imagine who some of these wrong bedfellows would be. But furthermore, the believing artist must refuse to be a mere spokesman. He must render his ideas

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dramatically rather than argue a case or bring forth a brief. The literary artist must not tell his reader how he should react and what he ought to feel. He must allow the reader to draw his own conclusions from the circumstances the novel has set forth. The literary artist may be a devout believer himself; but as an artist he is not writing an essay or preaching a sermon. He must be content to be an artist and not a mere spokesman for a church or any other institution.

In *The Moviegoer*, perhaps Percy's most beautifully crafted work, young Binx Bolling is a thoroughly disenchanted young man. He is well-born and well-educated. His family like him and have the power to promote his interests. He has a good job, a comfortable life, a bright future. Even the secretaries in his office are pretty and attractive. But Binx is not happy. His life lacks conviction and does not seem to be quite healthy or even real. In fact, Binx finds that the local movie house provides him with something closer to reality than he can find in Gentilly, the New Orleans suburb in which he has chosen to carry out his career of a half life.

The novel succeeds in the difficult task of making the reader aware of Binx's disorder, and it shows the steps—some serious, some comic—through which he proceeds as he comes to discover what matters most. But Binx's quest does not conclude with his becoming converted to Catholicism. As the novel ends, Binx is married to Kate, a girl who also has serious problems and needs not only love but responsible care. On the last page of the novel, Binx is asking Kate to do him a little favor, to go downtown and pick up some legal papers for him. It's a small task but Kate is genuinely unsure of herself. He reassures her with precise directions. His final words to her include not only reassurance but a pledge that he will be thinking of her all through her little task. It even includes a tenderly spoken command. His rather commonplace words imply something deeper, of course, something like "I'm trying to face up to reality now and so must you. I will try to help you to do so. We are in this thing together."

We have much the same sort of ending in Percy's last novel, *The Thanatos Syndrome*. Though full of action, some of it exciting and quite violent, this novel also ends with a very minor event, one whose significance has probably eluded—or at least temporarily misled—a good many readers. Tom More, the hero of the novel, is now at home: his wife has been restored to him. Financially he is not in good shape. Worst of all, as a physician he has lost most of his patients. But he has succeeded in one or two of his larger endeavors and now toward the very end of the novel one of his old patients returns rather suddenly. She tells him that everything is fine, but that she is terrified of something she feels is about to happen; she dreads something, but doesn't know what it is. The dream she used to have has been recurring. It has to do with the smell of winter apples in her grandmother's farmhouse in Vermont and the dream also includes the feeling that a stranger is coming. She believes that the stranger is a part of herself trying to tell her something and Dr. More encourages her by saying "Well?" Something important is afoot. But then the book ends here.

What is it that commits Percy to such artistic reserve and understatement? Is it perhaps part of his dread of being dismissed as no novelist but a spokesman for an institution? (Percy has been charged with this by some reviewers.) Or perhaps his forbearance and lightness of touch are simply parts of his personality? Whatever the cause, writing about the new Sunbelt South did not daunt Percy in the least. He rather relished the challenge. Listen to him on the subject of a Middlewesterner come to Louisiana: a man who has made two billion dollars in oil leases, who lives in an antebellum mansion in New Orleans, who has never read a novel in his life, and who is "so absorbed in deal-making that he is a stranger to his friends and family." "Maybe he can't use me," Percy writes. "But I can sure use him." There is a jovial confidence in a statement like this—

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something perfectly characteristic of this remarkable man. Would that Percy had lived to deal with this character from the Middlewest or others like him.

Of course, there were other sides of Walker Percy's warmth. I had the opportunity to experience one of them two or three years ago. When Percy heard that my wife was dying of cancer he generously offered to come up from Louisiana to New Haven and drive us around New England for a week to visit and dine at some of the old inns. It was a thoroughly handsome offer. I told him immediately that I could not accept so generous an invitation, and that, in any case, it was impossible. My wife was now on oxygen. Only a properly equipped ambulance could allow her to leave the house or her hospital bed.

I was emboldened, however, to ask him for a favor. I knew that *The Thanatos Syndrome*, though it had not yet appeared, was going through the press. I told him that my wife and I had so much enjoyed hearing him read an excerpt from it the year before that I wondered whether he had an extra proof that he could send for her to read in her hospital bed. A typed copy with corrections appeared within a few days. It proved to be my wife's last reading matter.

In losing Walker Percy, we have lost a remarkable figure in American literature and a generous man. Some of us have lost a very kind and dear friend.

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Letters

Orwell's reputation

To the Editors:

Why can't Joseph Epstein ("The Big O," May 1990) appreciate that *his* view of George Orwell, however dear to him, is just one view among many? In his review of my book about Orwell's multi-faceted reputation and controversial "afterlife," *The Politics of Literary Reputation*, Mr. Epstein bemoans that "somehow the portrait that emerges from all [Rodden's] angle shots comes out less rounded than blurred."

But that's just the point of the book.

Probably no one can carefully probe images of someone without having his own sharp, lucid portrait of that person brought into question. For me, Orwell is now forever a blurred figure. This does in some subtle way diminish, even as it enriches, my own formerly narrow, pristine image of his work and life. Perhaps Mr. Epstein resists the point (as I did for a long time) because, as he says, "Orwell has been one of a small number of writers from whom my own way of viewing the world derives." Mr. Epstein's view of Orwell *is* dear to him, as the passion of his review discloses. Likewise, Orwell is important to me—and to most of the readers of Orwell discussed in my book. But after examining their responses so closely—in getting to know their Orwells—I've renounced any attempt to harmonize all the images.

Mr. Epstein refers to Orwell as "a hero of culture." So he has been. And so he may remain. Yet it may be that future readers will be better able to acknowledge diversity, mediation, distance, opacity, and contingency in their intellectual heroes, and insist less on unity, transparence, directness, purity, and constancy. Perhaps we can relinquish our urge to unify and round off a figure. Instead we might become willing simply to see him as he variously saw himself and as others have seen him. Then we might come to value him in all of his conflicting historical images, even while holding that, for us, some are more equal than others. In doing so we might then prize *our* figure, and yet grant his capacity to serve as a model in diverse ways, which in no sense need entail a loss of esteem or even wonder. It could merely signify an enlarged awareness of the rainbow of perspectives on a life and the numerous possibilities for describing it anew.

John Rodden
University of Texas
Austin, TX

Joseph Epstein replies:

It would never have occurred to me that someone would set out to write a study of nearly five hundred densely printed pages containing more than twelve hundred footnotes in the hope of achieving a blurred picture of its subject. But now that Professor Rodden announces that this was precisely his intention, I must report that, at first flush, it struck me as, well, a bit nuts. But upon further reflection, it strikes me that perhaps Professor Rodden's book is part of the grand sweep of recent academic thought. Contemporary humanities and social-sciences academics have for some while now reported that there is no objec-

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tivity, and hence no truth; that nothing in writing is as it seems, and everything important is written —usually unconsciously—between the lines; that no subject is more important than any other (a colleague at the university where I teach recently proclaimed that *Middlemarch* is not necessarily more important than Bugs Bunny); and now, with Professor Rodden's letter, we have it that *clear* is out, *blurry* in. I had hitherto thought Professor Rodden's book merely a vastly overextended and therefore largely misbegotten work. But I see now, thanks to his letter, that it is intended as part of the general intellectual meltdown.

Sir Colin Davis

To the Editors:
I share Samuel Lipman's incredulity at the New York Philharmonic's failure to assert its primacy in American cultural life ("The Philharmonic Chooses a Music Director," June 1990). Yet, in looking at the orchestra's future plans, Mr. Lipman has spoken dismissively of a considerable artist, Sir Colin Davis, who ill deserves such handling.

I don't know what English publications Mr. Lipman is reading, but certainly none I've seen over the past half-decade grant him the status of a blandly lovable British culture hero. His last Covent Garden *Fidelio* aroused near fist fights there and in the press (*Punch* went so far as to criticize the battered Ford wagon Sir Colin drove to work). Sir Colin's standing with German-speaking audiences has been much higher than at home for over a decade now, a fact James Galway, his former principal flute, criticizes the British for in his autobiography.

No, Sir Colin Davis is not so easily categorizable. We are not going to see the software giants of the world vying for the right to issue his integral Beethoven and Brahms cycles thirty years from now. Mr. Lipman, however, has suggested that this image of the great conductor probably died with Karajan. I think that's right.

The best testimony of Sir Colin's achievement, however, are all the musicians and collectors who treasure an old record or broadcast of Dvořák's shorter works, Sibelius's tone poems, Stravinsky's or Berlioz's vocal music, or even the recent CD or telecast of Brahms's Third. Let's not group Sir Colin with his inferiors. Their numbers are growing at a sufficient rate to make this lack of discrimination commonplace.

David Saemann
Wayne, NJ

Samuel Lipman replies:
First I want to thank Mr. Saemann for his letter, despite his taking issue with me about my comment on Sir Colin Davis. It is always a pleasure these days to hear from a reader who enthusiastically supports *any* living musical figure.

This having been said, I am afraid that it would be rather difficult for Mr. Saemann to make the case that Sir Colin has not over the years been "much beloved" (my phrase, rather than Mr. Saemann's "culture hero") in England. He was, after all, the chief conductor and music director of the Royal Opera, Covent Garden, from 1971 through 1986; he was made C.B.E. by the Queen in 1965, and was knighted in 1980. So far as any controversy aroused by one or another of his English performances is concerned, I can only remark that not even the exceedingly much beloved Arturo Toscanini was universally approved during his most palmy American days.

In any case, the issue with Sir Colin Davis is not what kind of career he does or does not have in England, but what he might be able to accomplish as a frequent guest conductor for the New York Philharmonic. The current situation of the Philharmonic, as I have tried to make clear over the years, is particularly difficult and particularly important. In my opinion, solving the problems of the orchestra will require more leadership ability than Sir Colin has yet demonstrated. The issue is still open with Kurt Masur, the Philharmonic's newly chosen music director; his success would be appreciated by everyone.

Veritas?

To the Editors:
I would like to make a few remarks and ask a few questions regarding "Veritas?" (Notes & Comments: June 1990).

Beginning with the statement that "political imperatives are swamping the traditional ideals of

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intellectual achievement," I am curious about the implication that traditional ideals are born in some realm of everlasting perfection, beyond question and criticism. After all, wasn't slavery once a traditional ideal of white plantation owners? The word "traditional" is used to imply something universal and sacred, whereas "political imperatives" are petty nuisances. I would suggest that tradition be understood as somewhat evolving and organic, and that this very process can be an ideal of intellectual achievement.

As far as not being able to "tell the truth without being accused of being a racist," I wonder exactly who could be designated to extract and authorize "the truth" from complex racial predicaments as we have in this country today? As if it were all so clear and decipherable. Of the two students you quote, you charge with "self-righteousness" the black woman who feels insulted, while the white male who is frustrated (welcome to the club) because his perspectives are not taken as self-evident truths becomes some sort of martyr. Talk about self-righteous!

Judy Weinperson
Albany, NY

The Editors reply:

It pains us to be the first to acquaint Miss Weinperson with the following ideas:

1. To advocate the preservation of traditional educational ideals—the ideal, for example, that academic advancement be based on merit, not race or gender—in no way implies that those ideals are perfect or immutable. Indeed, the fact that, like all such ideals, they are fragile, imperfectly achieved, and have been articulated only after centuries of struggle suggests that we would do well to cherish and preserve them, not trample them underfoot in our rush to accommodate the latest political fashion. Moreover, to suppose that slavery can be described as "a traditional ideal of white plantation owners" betrays a stunning ignorance of the meaning of the words "tradition" and "ideal," to say nothing of the social reality of plantation owners.

2. To observe that in many areas of our culture today—and preeminently on many college campuses—one cannot "tell the truth without being accused of being a racist" is simply to register a fact. To pretend that calling attention to facts is a simplification of reality is the ultimate act of simplification.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

Fredric Jameson's laments *by Roger Kimball*
"On Classic Ground" at the Tate *by Jed Perl*
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Selling Henry James *by Joseph Epstein*
Burgoyne Diller at the Whitney *by Deborah Rosenthal*
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